FEBRUARY 7 2026

FT Weekend Magazine

MEDITATIONS IN AN EMERGENCY

By Martin Sandbu

ROSEBERYS
LONDON

+44 (0)20 8761 2522 | clientservices@roseberys.co.uk | **roseberys.co.uk**

Prints & Multiples | Design

Wednesday 18 February | Wednesday 25 February

AUCTIONS

FT Weekend Magazine

FEBRUARY 7 2026

Features

14 COVER STORY
After liberalism
The Harvard philosopher who foresaw our age of anger on what happens next
By Martin Sandbu

22
Everyday sorrows
A photographic record for my mother
By Ocean Vuong

30
Sight for poor eyes
Meet the biohackers who believe myopia can be cured with positive thinking
By Tomas Weber

PAGE 22. 'I JUST DIDN'T KNOW OUR LIFE WAS SO SAD'

OCEAN VUONG

Departments

Intellect

7 Tim Harford
What can't be measured is worth knowing

8 Departments
Reports from FT bureaux

10 Gallery
Harold Offeh

12 Simon Kuper
Trump: Europe's common foe

Appetites

37 Jancis Robinson
The Loire loosens up

39 Jay Rayner
Mezzogiorno, Westminster

40 Recipe Club
Greek meatballs

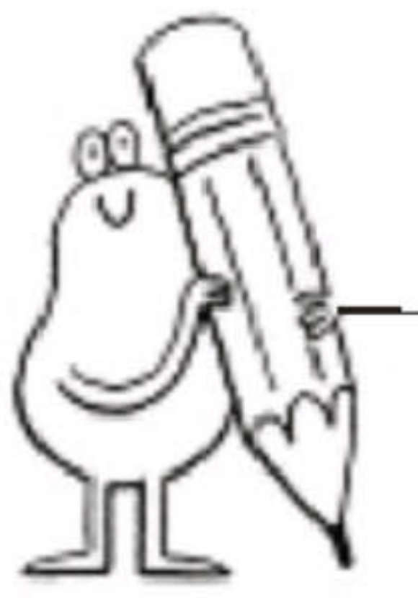
43 Marina O'Loughlin
A critique of criticism

Plus

44 Games

46 Robert Shrimsley
Do I need to cut back on Deliveroo?

ON THE COVER
ILLUSTRATION *by* PETE REYNOLDS



MARGINALIA *by* NADINE REDLICH

FT Weekend Magazine Issue number 1,162 FT.com/magazine • @FTMag FT Weekend Magazine is printed by Roularta Media Group in Belgium and published by The Financial Times Ltd, Bracken House, 1 Friday Street, London EC4M 9BT.

© The Financial Times Ltd 2026 No part of this magazine may be reproduced in any form without the prior express permission of the publisher

Publishing Dorota Gwilliam – Global Director, Luxury & Weekend Portfolio – dorota.gwilliam@ft.com Isaac Peltz – Commercial sales & product manager – isaac.peltz@ft.com. Sadia Choudhury – Advertising sales executive – sadia.choudhury@ft.com **Production** Mark Frisby – Advertising production – mark.frisby@ft.com/magscopy@ft.com

Letters

CHINA'S SECRET WEAPON IN THE GLOBAL TECH RACE

by Zijing Wu

Great article. I loved the personal context provided by Zijing, which gave the piece a real human feel. Also, fantastic to show what China has done to help it develop to where it is today – a lot of organisation, hard work and sacrifice, with some genuine strategic thinking.

For the government to identify AI as an area of focus in 2017 and then to achieve real-world results nearly 10 years later takes co-ordination, long-term thinking and discipline. China is outcompeting the rest of the world, from a governance level down. Its governance infrastructure is performing incredibly well. I think that is uncomfortable for a lot of people.

P HUANG VIA FT.COM

We shouldn't be making direct comparisons between the Chinese and the western models. Rather, we should examine what we need – for our society, economy and future – and make necessary changes to improve our system. China started with a need and designed an approach to meet it. The genius system works because it deploys scarce resources to cultivate great talent. When you're starting at zero and you're aiming to catch up to the west, that's the best approach. The lesson here is not to copy China, nor is it to dismiss it. It's to borrow the things that work, such as sustained, direct government support at the pre-college level, to augment our own strengths.

TACT VIA FT.COM

THE GO-BETWEEN

by Courtney Weaver

The Vatican, the Americans, the Russians, tech billionaires, exotic mysterious girlfriends, assorted politicians, lots of money – and in the middle, the eternal fixer. Straight out of a John le Carré novel.

MUSTANG SALLY VIA FT.COM

BERLIN'S 4,000 TONNES OF SURPLUS SPUDS

by Ruth Weissmann

What a joyous read. No surprise the farmers are complaining. It's all they have ever done (usually while complaining about someone else's complaining). But being a European export to the Americas, I can't help but remind myself that those potatoes are not a native species but an import from the Americas. They went the other way!

AMERICAN PERSON VIA FT.COM

They could be turned into vodka.

REALIST VIA FT.COM

HAPPINESS BEGINS AT HOME

by Tim Harford

But who is more likely to answer a poll? The happy and outward looking or the glum and deep in depression? I'd argue the disparity in the numbers is down to a fundamental bias – such polls are skewed snapshots of mood because you are far more likely to get responses from happy, engaged people.

JAMES LE HOUX, LONDON

THE MEANINGFUL LIFE

by Tim Harford

I enjoyed Tim Harford's recent column (January 24) and its reminder that work can still give structure and meaning to our lives, even when it often feels tedious or frustrating. That said, I found the turn to AI and ChatGPT at the end slightly distracting. The irony is clever, but references to generative AI now appear so frequently that they risk overshadowing the argument rather than sharpening it.

In this case, the reflections on work and meaning felt strong enough to stand without that final twist.

HYUNJI KANG, LONDON

NEXT-GEN GRAPES

by Jancis Robinson

Mencia was a revelation to me in the past few years (my ignorance, no doubt). There are wines coming out of Greece that taste of red burgundy at half the price: this is the holy grail. And recently from The Wine Society I've been drinking a budget marsanne from Chile – just marsanne not a Rhône mix – and it's delicious.

It's still a groundbreaking, exciting time to be a wine drinker.

CHESTER + WELLBORN VIA FT.COM

I only discovered Assyrtiko from Ms Robinson's FT article some two years ago and fell in love with it then. Sadly, I live in Ontario, Canada, where we are subject to a government monopoly in alcohol distribution. One silver lining is that having such a monopoly means that bureaucrats in control don't have an incentive to focus on profitability. When Assyrtiko began trending, someone high up must have decided to take in anything they could find. As a result, we have more than 25 Assyrtiko choices available.

GDPOSEHN VIA FT.COM

It's good to be reminded that there are many other grapes and styles. Having recently relocated and severely downsized, my physical cellar, full of Bordeaux, is tiny. I am free to experiment and Jancis is a wonderful guide. Albarino, anyone?

OLYMPUS JOHN VIA FT.COM

DOVER STREET COUNTER, MAYFAIR

by Jay Rayner

Excellent review of what sounds like an admirable dining and drinking venue. It was always one of my Sunday rituals to read Jay's restaurant column in The Observer first thing in the morning over coffee, juice, toast and marmalade. Now this FT column is similarly my Saturday morning ritual, and particularly valuable to me given that I am currently working out in Abu Dhabi, far from British family and friends. If you're ever passing by this way Jay, think of us British migrant workers who would value your opinion on some of the restaurants in the Middle East.

DIVINGFORPEARLS VIA FT.COM

A WINTER FAMILY FEAST

by Oli Brown, Rowley Leigh and Ruth Leigh

What a pleasant surprise on a rainy north-Italian morning. I do miss Rowley Leigh's weekly writing.

FELIX CLAUS VIA FT.COM

Really great recipes, but I missed the bit about keeping it straightforward and not messing around in the kitchen too much! This is a feast requiring a week in bed to recover.

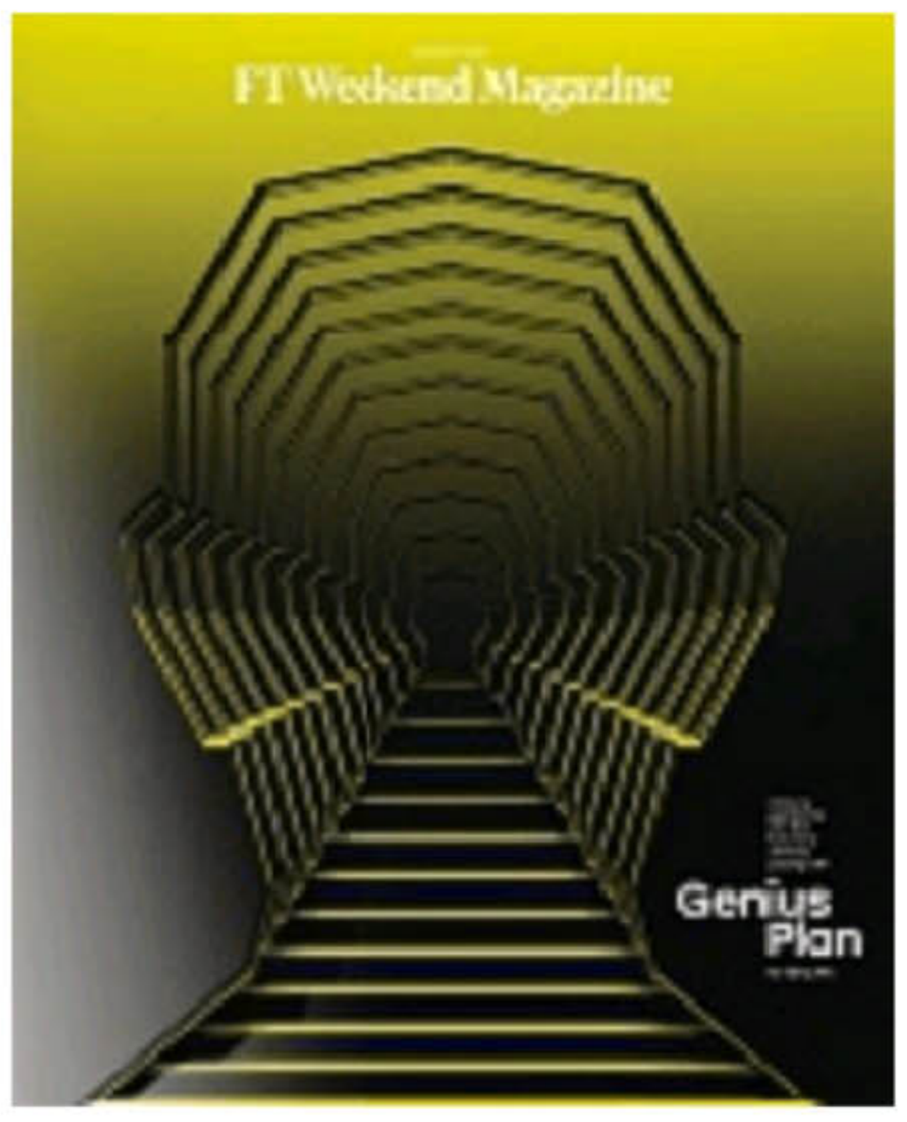
LANCELOT VIA FT.COM

SHOULD I HIRE SOMEONE WITH DESIGNS ON MY JOB?

by Robert Shrimsley

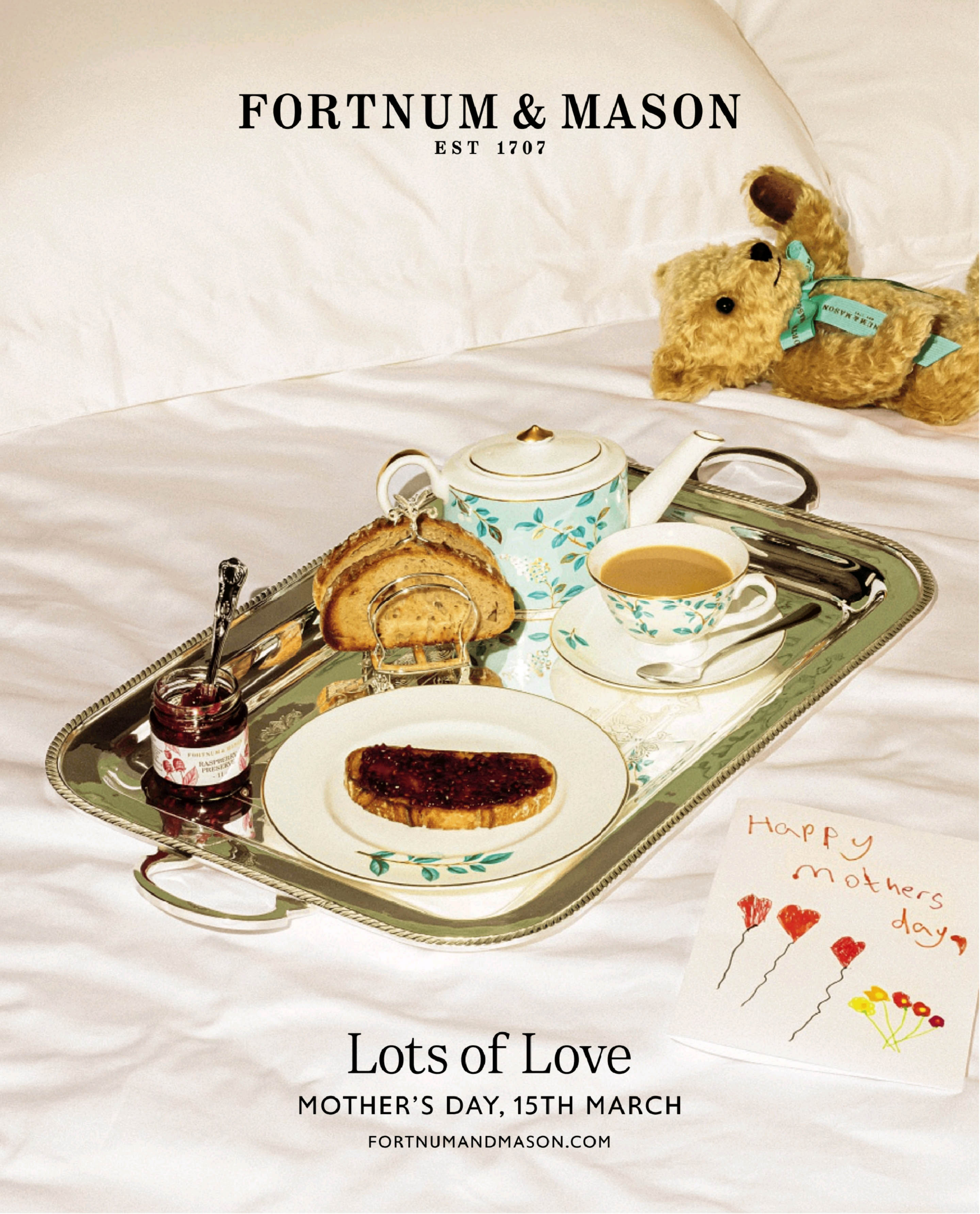
I give some of my work to ChatGPT, which definitely has designs on my job.

CHARLIESAYS VIA FT.COM



JANUARY 31
CHINA'S GENIUS PLAN

TO CONTRIBUTE
Comment on our articles online or email magazineletters@ft.com. Please include a daytime telephone number and full address (not for publication). Letters may be edited.


FORTNUM & MASON
EST 1707
FORTNUM & MASON
RASPBERRY PRESERVE
Happy mothers day
Lots of Love
MOTHER'S DAY, 15TH MARCH
FORTNUMANDMASON.COM

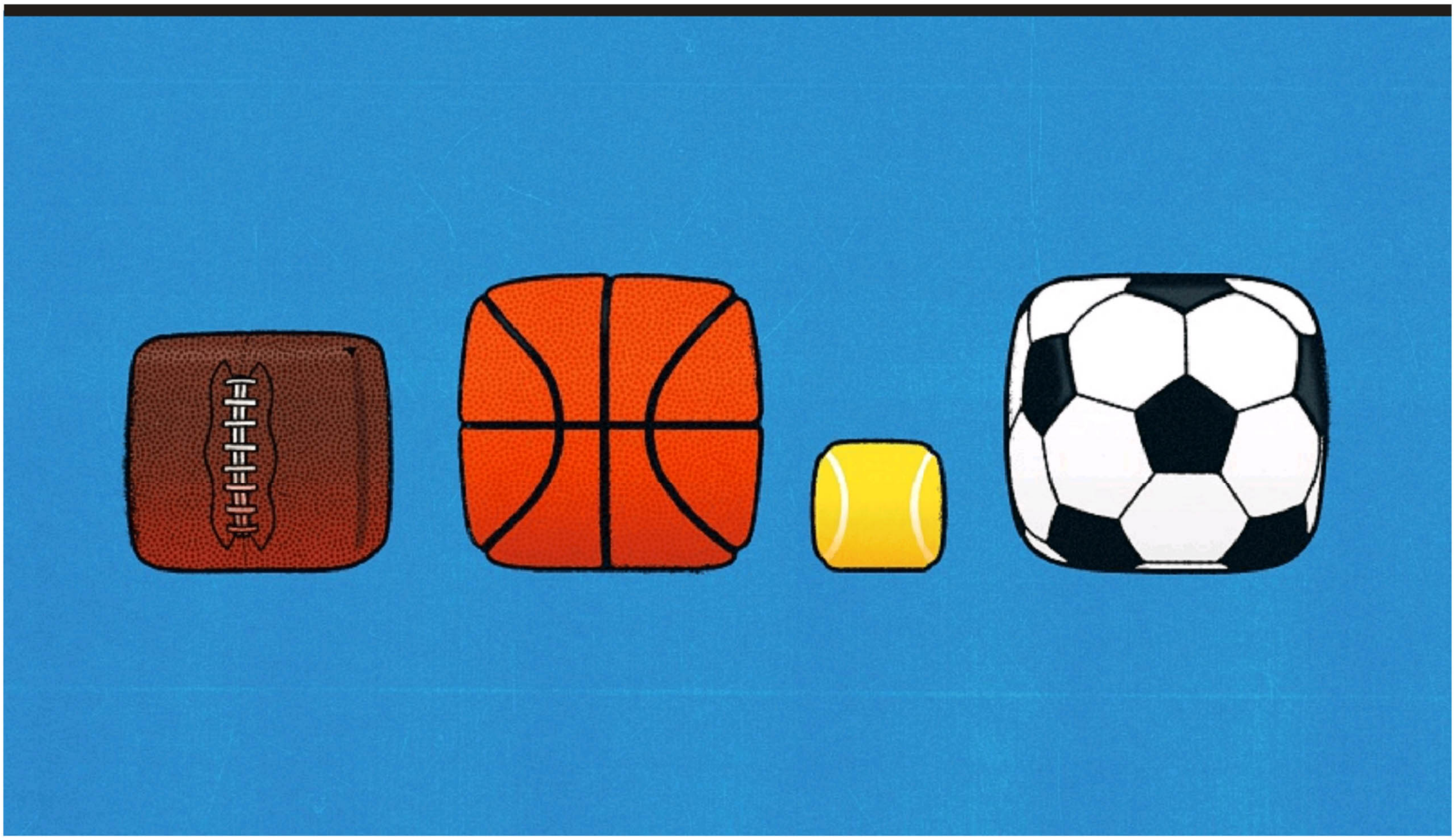
Redefine how you travel in 2026. Own a private collection of *five* extraordinary holiday homes.

Make 2026 the year you elevate the way you travel and live. August provides private collections of beautifully designed holiday homes across Europe's most iconic destinations, fully managed for a seamless, stress-free experience. We handle everything—from acquisition to renovation to ongoing care—so you can simply *arrive and enjoy*.

August

augustcollections.com
@august.collections

Intellect



Undercover Economist

What the metrics miss

by TIM HARFORD

ILLUSTRATION *by* ALBERTO MIRANDA

I recently described the contradictions inherent in my fitness-tracking watch. On the one hand, it had unlocked the joy of running for me, encouraging me to run further and faster and set goals I'd never dreamt of achieving. On the other, the watch could also push me into counterproductive behaviour, such as running through injury – and had a tendency to turn a pleasant run into a quantified grind.

What an eye-opening delight, then, to pick up C Thi Nguyen's book *The Score*. Nguyen is a philosopher and, more importantly, an enthusiast for all sorts of playful activity from rock-climbing to yo-yo tricks to role-playing games. He argues that the contradiction I found in my fitness watch is part of a much bigger story about the way we have allowed quantified metrics to seep into so many parts of life.

The tyranny of targets is familiar stuff to social scientists, even if it seems to be a source of endless unpleasant surprises for policymakers and corporate executives. Charles Goodhart, an economist, and Donald Campbell, a psychologist, each famously explained that perfectly decent quantitative metrics become corrupted once they're pressed into service as targets.

Nguyen agrees, but wants to go further. The problem is not just that we contort our behaviour to hit the target in the service of some bureaucratic incentive; it's that we cease to realise that we are contorting our behaviour at all. The metrics, which are inevitably reductive, begin to seep into our own judgment of what matters. Nguyen calls this value capture: we abandon our rich and subtle personal values in favour of the simplified, quantified values we are being so conveniently offered.

Why does this happen? A simple answer is "because of computers", but there is more to it than that. The rise of quantification isn't the result of some tech-bro conspiracy. It's been happening for a long time and for some good reasons.

First, quantified evaluations – of a student essay, a surgeon's safety record or a bottle of wine – can be added up, averaged, analysed and compared across contexts. They become portable: you can compare one school class to another, one hospital to another, one wine producer to another. Everything can be analysed from a distance.

Second, quantification is often the result of algorithmic rules. Take the inputs, crank the algorithmic handle and out come the outputs. If you're a university president wanting your institution to rise up the rankings, there are levers to pull: persuade more candidates to apply so that you can be more selective, spend money on the library and help your graduates find jobs. These rules are accessible: you don't need deep expertise to apply them or to interpret them.

> Even the best metrics are reductive, stripping away context, discretion and judgment

Third, these algorithmic procedures tend to make people interchangeable. Rather than relying on the ineffable intuitions of a teacher or a doctor or a coach, you have an objective, consistent process: any qualified person can follow the quantified process and so all qualified people are substitutes for each other.

Fourth, all these quantified metrics allow a centralised authority to co-ordinate and control what would otherwise be a mess of idiosyncratic decisions.

Portability, accessibility, interchangeability and co-ordination are often huge advantages. It is no exaggeration to suggest that modern life, including modern science, modern technology, modern politics and the modern economy, depends on these four key features of quantification.

But each of the four has a downside. While quantification allows us to make comparisons across different contexts, it also strips away those contexts. Rules-based decisions are intelligible and accessible to non-experts, but they are also rigid, failing to adapt to the subtleties of circumstance. Making people interchangeable does away with unwelcome inconsistencies, but also robs decision-making of individual judgment and sensitivity. And the downside of co-ordination is the loss of autonomy.

There are good metrics and bad ones, of course. Some are corrupt, counter-productive and riddled with perverse incentives. Others impose method on madness, identifying more effective medicines, more productive manufacturing techniques or more profitable trades.

STILL, EVEN THE BEST METRICS ARE INEVitably reductive, stripping away context, discretion and judgment. These metrics also strip away diversity, forcing everyone to agree on what is best, even when we should let a thousand flowers bloom. In the pre-metric era, a university might have had a distinctive outlook, aiming to serve a particular kind of student in a particular way. Once each university wants to rise up the rankings they will need to embrace whatever values the rankings enshrine. If the metrics are good ones, then quality might rise, but the range of offerings will shrink. If the metrics are bad ones, then both quality and diversity will suffer.

There may be little point in trying to turn the tide of quantification in business and policy, but we can at least try to prevent it seeping into our souls. Yet why is it so easy to let the data rule the way we sleep, the way we move, the way we eat and even the way we interact our friends? Yes, digital devices have been designed to twiddle our dials. But the world is also a confusing place and we are hungry for simple, accessible guidance. Rely too much on the metrics, however, and we risk outsourcing our judgment and replacing it with thin, globalised values that do not really reflect who we are.

Like Nguyen, I love games, and games have rules and a score. Why do they feel so different from the gamified world in which we chase streaks on our language-learning apps, try to move the VO_2 needle on our fitness watches and, at work, crank away at some corporate performance metric with one eye on promotion?

Perhaps the secret to a good game or sport is that the goals are both tantalisingly challenging and utterly unimportant: that's true of my marathon, Nguyen's rock-climbing, a game of football or a game of chess. What makes the game fun is that it's so hard to succeed – and that whether you succeed or fail, you can always play another game.

In a fun game, the rules are a scaffolding for playful mastery. And in a gamified life? The rules may be a scaffolding for productivity – but all too often, they are a cage for us poor players. **FT**

DEPARTMENTS

REPORTS *from* LESSER-KNOWN
FT BUREAUX

LITERATURE

Slow and steady doesn't always win the race

A list of books written quickly

- *The Dancer at the Gai-Moulin* by Georges Simenon – 154 pages in 25 hours
- *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne 216 pages in two and a half days
- *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson – 68 pages in three days
- *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho – 158 pages in two weeks
- *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, by Samuel Johnson – 110 pages in one week
- *The Tortoise and the Hare* by Elizabeth Jenkins 270 pages in three weeks
- *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro 264 pages in four weeks

SOURCE: HENRY ELIOT, *ELIOT'S BOOK OF BOOKISH LISTS*

NATURAL SCIENCE

Meet the world's fastest snail

"The annual World Snail Racing Championships held in July in Congham, Norfolk, is conducted on a 33cm circular course outside St Andrew's Church. The runners race from the centre to the perimeter. Some race several times as they are divided into heats to cater for the 150 snail competitors who enter every year. The all-time record holder is a snail named Archie, trained by Carl Bramham (UK), who sprinted to the winning post in 2 min 00 sec in 1995."

SOURCE: *THE GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS 1995*

ENGINEERING

How much track for HS2 has already been laid?

"Under plans set out more than a decade ago, HS2 was to cost £32.7bn and trains would be running by next year. Now that money has been spent, the network has been cut to one line, no track has been laid and no train has been built."

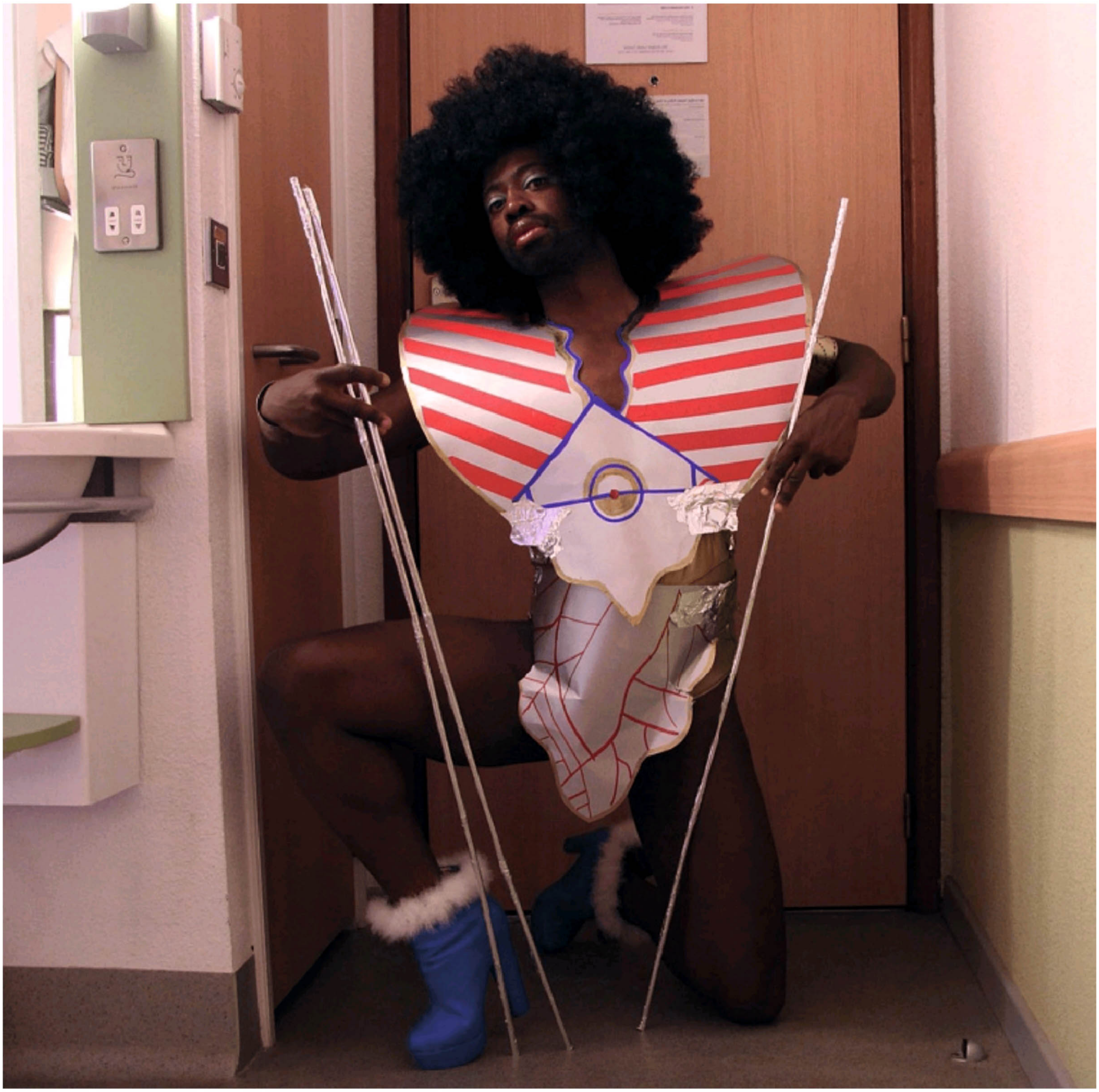
SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN, JUNE 18 2025

LAST WEEK'S THEME: SCARCITY

Knight
Frank

We’re here for where
life takes you.

Start your property journey at **knightfrank.co.uk**



COVERS, 'AFTER BETTY DAVIS, THEY SAY I'M DIFFERENT, 1974', 2013

GALLERY

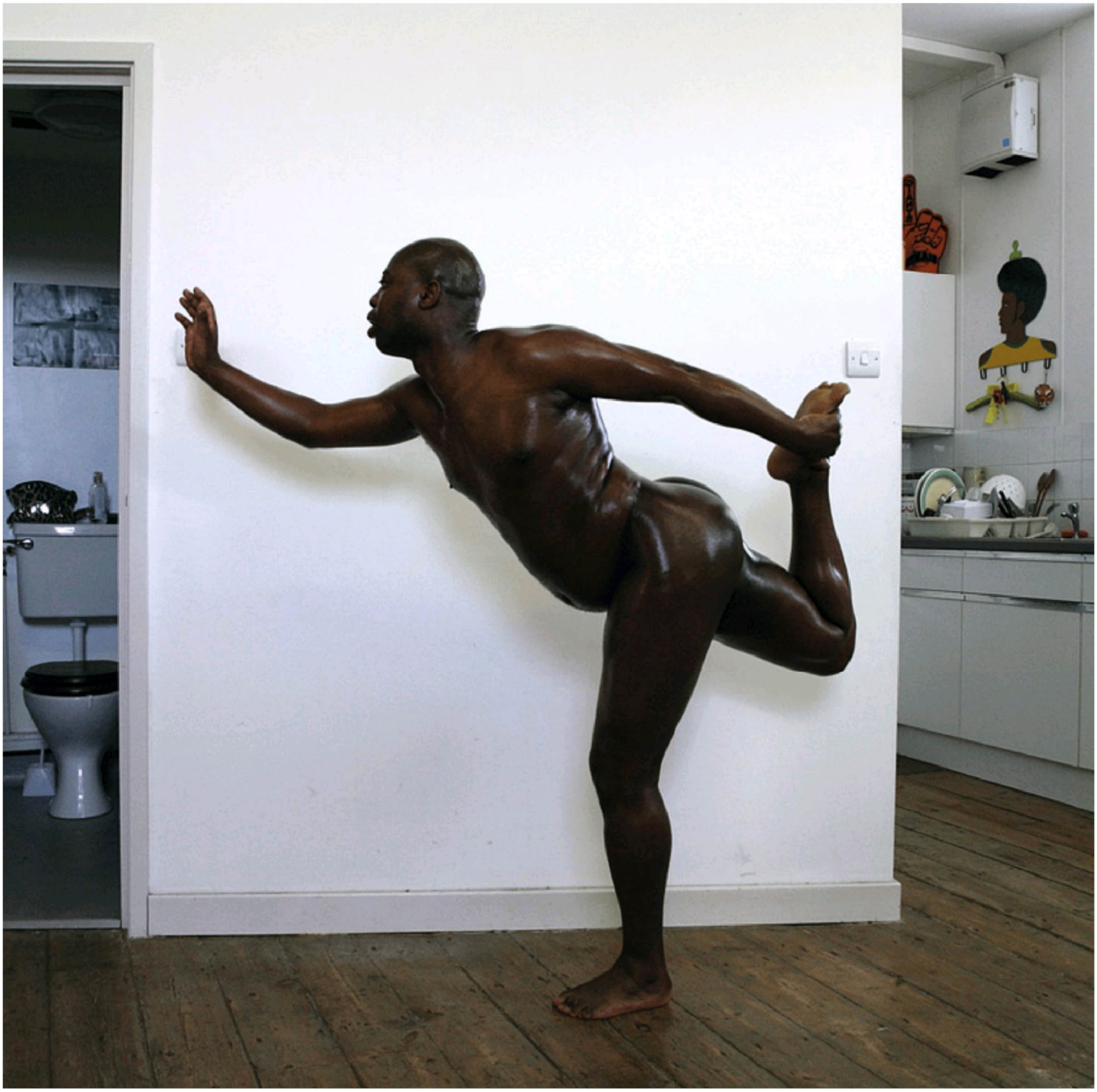
HAROLD OFFEH

by JOSH LUSTIG

Every title is a promise. For Harold Offeh's mid-career show at Kettle's Yard spanning 20 years of artistic exploration in video, performance, music, social practice and photography, the artist chose a lyric from the band Portishead. *Mmm, Gotta Try a Little Harder, It Could be Sweet* is a three-part, multilayered title that hints at the playfulness of the artist's work, but also at its intricacy. Beneath the humour, is something else, something heavier, more questioning.

"The three parts of the lyric also seem to capture or embody important aspects of my work over the years," Offeh says in the show's catalogue. "The 'mmm' is this attempt to speak – I like how as a sound it communicates so many things in different ways: it's affirmative, it can be quizzical, it's desiring, it's dreamy etc. I love its multiplicity."

"Gotta try a little harder" points at Offeh's desire to push himself, to use his body, to test his limits. "With a background in theatre, I felt I could perform," he says. "The third line, 'it could be sweet', captures a hopeful desire and



COVERS, 'AFTER GRACE JONES, ISLAND LIFE, 1985, GRACEFUL (ARABESQUE 1)', 2008

longing; there is a kind of utopianism and joy. But I like the tension that comes with the word 'could'. So it may or may not be."

This uncertainty, the sense that something else may (or may not) be going on below the surface, is at the heart of Offeh's work. It often makes you laugh, before you stop yourself and ask, what am I actually laughing at? Humour is a difficult thing to do seriously.

"At the [risk] of coming across as needy, humour is another important point of connection," Offeh tells me. "It's so hard to get people to engage with contemporary art. For me, humour has been a means to circumnavigate the headwinds of scepticism and apathy that confront image-makers. I hope humour or absurdity can elicit curiosity and conversation."

Drawing on popular culture, Offeh's art feels egalitarian and unpretentious. The themes are complex – including racial and sexual stereotyping, migration and postcolonial discourse – but the imagery is free of the fetishisation of beauty that often accompanies visual art. Photography is a tool of communication. Clear and direct. Offeh's work explores the nature of desire and fearlessly questions stereotypes, always striving to peer behind the curtain of contemporary culture's tropes and narratives. FT

"Harold Offeh: Mmm, Gotta Try a Little Harder, It Could Be Sweet" is at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge until March 1, www.kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk

World View

United by a common foe

by SIMON KUPER

ILLUSTRATION *by* HARRY HAYSOM

It's an old tenet of political thought that to build a collective identity you need an enemy. An adversary can force your people to cohere. Hitler played that role for Britain, and the USSR for the US. After the Soviet enemy collapsed, so did American unity.

But the EU only acquired external enemies in the past decade: first the Brexiters, then Vladimir Putin, with China lurking in the background, and now, at last, the perfect enemy, Donald Trump. He has probably done more to unite Europe than any European ever did.

Lack of enemies long enfeebled Europe. There just didn't seem much need to fight for the cause. When I recently researched the founding of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, I was struck that almost nobody opposed it. Here was a centuries-old ideal, a united Europe, which had never previously materialised, yet when a handful of leaders whose countries had just fought each other in a terrible war agreed to it, barely consulting voters, almost everyone said: OK. The US backed the EEC, the UK didn't join but barely opposed, the Soviets worried more about Nato, and large parliamentary majorities in the six founding countries ratified the EEC's creation.

A technocratic economic union without enemies inspired little emotion. Nobody would die for the blue and gold flag, and only a few Ryder Cup ultras ever waved it at a sporting event. In TV series and films, the hero fighting geopolitical baddies was almost always an American, not a European.

Brexit became the first potential existential threat to the EU. Many people thought it would prompt other exits. In 2018, Italy's far-right leader Matteo Salvini, just before entering government, compared the EU to "the Titanic about to sink". In response to the threat, citizens' support for the union jumped to its highest level since 1983, reported the European Commission's Eurobarometer survey in spring 2018. Brexit killed off continental exit movements.

Then Putin replaced the Brexiters as Europe's enemy-in-chief, and helped advance European unity. By autumn 2024, even before Trump's election, 74 per cent of respondents to the Eurobarometer survey said they felt they were citizens of the EU, the highest level in more than 20 years.

> Trump has probably done more to unite Europe than any European ever did

But Trump is the best enemy yet. If a television writers' room designed the perfect villain, he would usurp the house of your trusted protector. He would fill the minds even of people who think about politics for five minutes a week. He would threaten to hurt you, as Trump did during January's "Greenland moment". And he would incarnate the opposite of your group's stated ideals, in this case peace and democracy. Trump also comes with a wonderful array of sub-villains: US tech oligarchs, whose products inhabit European psyches like nothing before them.

I've never previously seen Europeans feel so European. Last week I attended an elite gathering in the fantastically Atlanticist Netherlands, where the mainstream opinion was that we had lost the US and needed to defend ourselves. One attendee, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Dutch secretary-general of Nato from 2004 to 2009, said that Europe couldn't defend itself alone, and that the US still supported Nato, yet added: "I have fear of abandonment, but I am past the mourning process."

I then saw the prime ministers of Denmark and Greenland speak at the Parisian university Sciences Po, where the assembled students and even some journalists gave them a standing ovation. At last, Europe is tugging at heartstrings. If the continent is now decolonising itself from its American master, that's both terrifying and exhilarating.

These aren't just the elite emotions. The latest Eurobazooka survey of 7,498 Europeans, conducted for French journal Le Grand Continent, is startling. Big majorities backed sending European troops to defend Greenland. Fifty-one per cent said Trump was an enemy of Europe; only 8 per cent called him a friend. Three per cent of German Christian Democrats, the ultimate Atlanticists, thought he was a democrat. And, unusually for a foreign-policy issue, awareness of the "Greenland moment" was nearly total.

The survey identified only one European political grouping divided over Trump: the far right. Some of its voters like him, and others don't. He is splitting the far right just as migration split the European left. I'd always doubted that Europe existed as anything more than an unfinished single market. That might be changing.

To this day, most mattresses are made using synthetic materials and sprayed with fire retardant chemicals. At Naturalmat, we've always thought this was ludicrous.

Since 1999, from the banks of the river Exe in Devon, we've only used natural, organic and sustainable materials to make our beds and mattresses.

Thanks to these natural fibres, including organic wool sourced directly from farmers here in the southwest, our mattresses offer a far healthier, restful, and of course, natural night's sleep.

organic. local. sustainable.

Certified B® Corporation

naturalmat®

London | Devon | Knutsford | Cotswolds | Dorking

NOTES FOR A WORLD ON THE BRINK

By Martin Sandbu
Illustration by Pete Reynolds

I. RECOLLECTION

One Friday last autumn, a message dropped into my inbox announcing that Michael Sandel, a Harvard University political thinker, would be awarded the Berggruen Prize, a sort of Nobel for public philosophers.

My first thought was that Sandel, a lifetime critic of the kind of philosophical liberalism that has influenced western politics for half a century, was a deserving winner. The 72-year-old has taught at Harvard since 1980, but has reached far beyond the ivory tower with his hugely popular Socratic style of moral questioning, calling for a less market-dominated and more civic-minded public philosophy.

He has the ear of national leaders. His public lectures have drawn packed crowds to open-air stadiums, the Sydney Opera House and St Paul's Cathedral. His undergraduate course, "Justice", is one of Harvard's most popular, drawing many hundreds of students a year. The online version, which is free to watch, has been visited by many millions of viewers including, notably, in China. Over the decades, Sandel has shaped the minds of tens of thousands of young people who have gone on to occupy privileged places in the global elite.

I was one of them. As a PhD student in political economy and government, I took Sandel's graduate seminar and worked as a teaching fellow for "Justice". So the news of Sandel's prize, coming as the world is spiralling into aggressive illiberal nationalism and social unrest, gave me a tingle of nostalgia for that more optimistic period. When I came to Harvard in 1998, it seemed that history had ended and liberal democratic capitalism had triumphed. My generation was ready to be masters of all we surveyed.

With hindsight, the themes Sandel has developed since the 1980s feel like a metronome beat to the changes that brought that era to an end. He was among those who warned early that the prevailing liberal thinking did not pay sufficient attention to the role of communities in letting us live as self-governing citizens. He warned that relying on markets to organise every area of human life would undermine the social practices that imbue our lives with meaning. And he questioned much-vaunted notions of meritocracy. Sandel has a lot to say, then, about our rageful era of political polarisation.

The strange reflection of his influence is how the Maga movement in the US and its ideological allies abroad have used arguments that look like perverted versions of Sandel's warnings. Vice-president JD Vance, Maga godfather Steve Bannon and tech oligarch Peter Thiel can come across as so many "Bizarro Sandels" with their complaints about where the liberal establishment has taken the country, though in the defence of quite different positions from his.

If anything, the rise of populism, which Sandel foresaw, has only intensified the problems he argued against: the erosion of public spirit, polarised societies, the commodification of everything, the false promises of meritocracy – in short, the corruption of the public sphere. Watching these developments unfold, I started to think again about Sandel's decades of work. I wondered if I, and the rest of my cohort, had missed or ignored a key to preparing for this political moment. Even, perhaps, a blueprint for something better.

So last November, I got back in touch with my old professor, and over the course of the winter we had several long conversations about where things might have gone wrong, both in the realm of ideas and in the world at large.

II. CONFESSION

These are particularly poignant questions for my generation, those of us now in or hitting our fifties. We are old enough to have experienced the cold war and the revolutions of 1989 and young enough that the new societies they produced were ours to shape. Especially for those with a privileged background or education, what Francis Fukuyama called the "end of history" was supposed to put prosperity, freedom and ever-increasing tolerance within reach. The loss of that dream is our generation's loss. It may also be our fault.

If you were a student of political philosophy in the mid-90s, you would be expected to take sides in what was known as the "liberalism vs communitarianism" debate. This contest of ideas, which I first encountered as an Oxford undergraduate in the mid-1990s, had caught fire after the giant of postwar liberal philosophy, John Rawls, redefined the field with his 1974 magnum opus, *A Theory of Justice*. Here he laid out his view of "justice as fairness": that a just society is one with the political and economic arrangements which a person would choose if they did not know what their economic, cultural or social positions in it would be. In such a position, Rawls claimed, people would adopt a system with the mix of market freedoms and redistributions that maximised the material wellbeing of those worst off, with equal opportunities for all, while being neutral with respect to any religious, moral and cultural ideas of how to live.

This theory of "liberal egalitarianism" was extraordinarily influential. With it, Rawls redefined political philosophy to a point where almost everything that followed was either a commentary or a critique on his work, challenging his conclusions but from within his framework. Only a minority of thinkers rejected it more fundamentally. Sandel was firmly in that minority.

By the time I arrived at Harvard, Sandel had long since established himself as a critic of the dominant liberalism, first with his 1982 book, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, then, in 1996, with *Democracy's Discontent*, which proposed a more "civic" alternative conception of politics. Sandel's philosophical rejection of Rawls' reasoning was that it requires an impossibly "unencumbered self", so stripped of attachments to family, community, country, faith or vocation that it could not bear the substantive conclusions he built on it. This was summarised it as "prioritising the right over the good", elevating abstract neutrality rather than culturally informed beliefs about what makes a good life. Sandel he was not alone. Thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Walzer raised related objections, which were grouped, at times dismissively, as the "communitarian" critique of liberal theory.

But Sandel's critique of Rawls was also a political one. "I worried," he told me this winter, "that, politically, the claim to arrange the basic structure of society in a way that was 'neutral' toward the competing moral, and even spiritual, conceptions of citizens would be seen as disingenuous… and disempowering. If people were asked to leave their moral and political convictions outside when they entered the public square, then, in effect, the fundamental questions are decided by markets

BACK THEN I THOUGHT SANDEL PROTESTED TOO MUCH. HIS ARGUMENTS FELT TOO ANTI-LIBERAL, EVEN A LITTLE REACTIONARY

and by technocrats, rather than by democratic citizens deliberating."

This was just the sort of thinking I had reconnected with Sandel to explore. I sensed that the ideas that exercised political philosophers in that pivotal era around the collapse of communism had shaped the way politics was practised in a way that had left too many citizens disempowered.

When I contacted him, Sandel responded with alacrity. He seemed particularly interested in helping me map his ideas on to the trajectory of my generation. It was more than a decade since I had last seen him, but apart from ageing – he welcomed his first grandchild between our online meetings – he had not changed much. He was as interested in other people's views, and friendly in his disagreement with them, as I remembered from his seminars a quarter-century ago.

In preparation for our conversations, Sandel directed me to a passage in *Democracy's Discontent*: "To the extent that contemporary politics puts sovereign states and sovereign selves in question, it is likely to provoke reactions from those who would banish ambiguity, shore up borders, harden the distinction between insiders and outsiders and promise a politics to 'take back our culture and take back our country', to 'restore our sovereignty' with a vengeance."

Today this sounds more than a little prophetic. It also, as I put it to Sandel, casts him in the role of Cassandra, the Trojan seer in Greek mythology cursed with a foresight that those she shared it with declined to heed, with tragic results. If so, it has an uncomfortable implication for those of us who were in a position to listen. I, for one, was primed to be impressed by Sandel's critiques. One reason why I chose to pursue a PhD was a hope of finding a way out of the blithe fatalism that prevailed in those days in American and British politics. The 1990s were the heyday of globalisation, a time when trust in markets dominated the thinking of people in power. As far as anyone could tell, we were heading towards a free-market future, an ever more integrated and "flat" world in which man-made barriers and natural transaction costs would disappear. "There was no alternative" to state retrenchment or economic globalisation, as politicians from Margaret Thatcher to Angela Merkel would argue over the decades. Not only that, it was implied that our lack of choice in the matter was fine because this would be the best outcome for all.

In my short academic career, and in journalism later, I hunted for the cracks in conventional economic policy arguments to show there were more alternatives than often assumed. The questions Sandel had taught me to ask contributed to that desire. Even so, back then I thought Sandel protested too much. His arguments felt too anti-liberal; his demotion of individual preference in favour of wider, cultural sources of meaning felt old-fashioned, even a little reactionary. Or perhaps they felt too much like parenting to someone ready to enter a newly opening world.

Rereading Sandel's work now, one idea stands out that I hadn't paid enough attention to: the insistence that we should care about "the civic consequences of economic power". This was a richer view of how to think about economic policy than the one held by most centrist politicians after 1989. And the failure to appreciate it goes a long way to explain what went wrong in the west.

III. REGRET

Sandel always resisted the "communitarian" label. His preoccupation was, and remains, to advance a different view of freedom from that he identified with Rawls. In liberal theory, he argued, freedom means "getting what I want, satisfying my desires – provided I don't violate the rights of others to pursue theirs". But this "consumerist" conception of freedom crowds out a "civic" version, in which individuals are only free insofar as they can have a "meaningful voice in shaping the forces that govern the collective project".

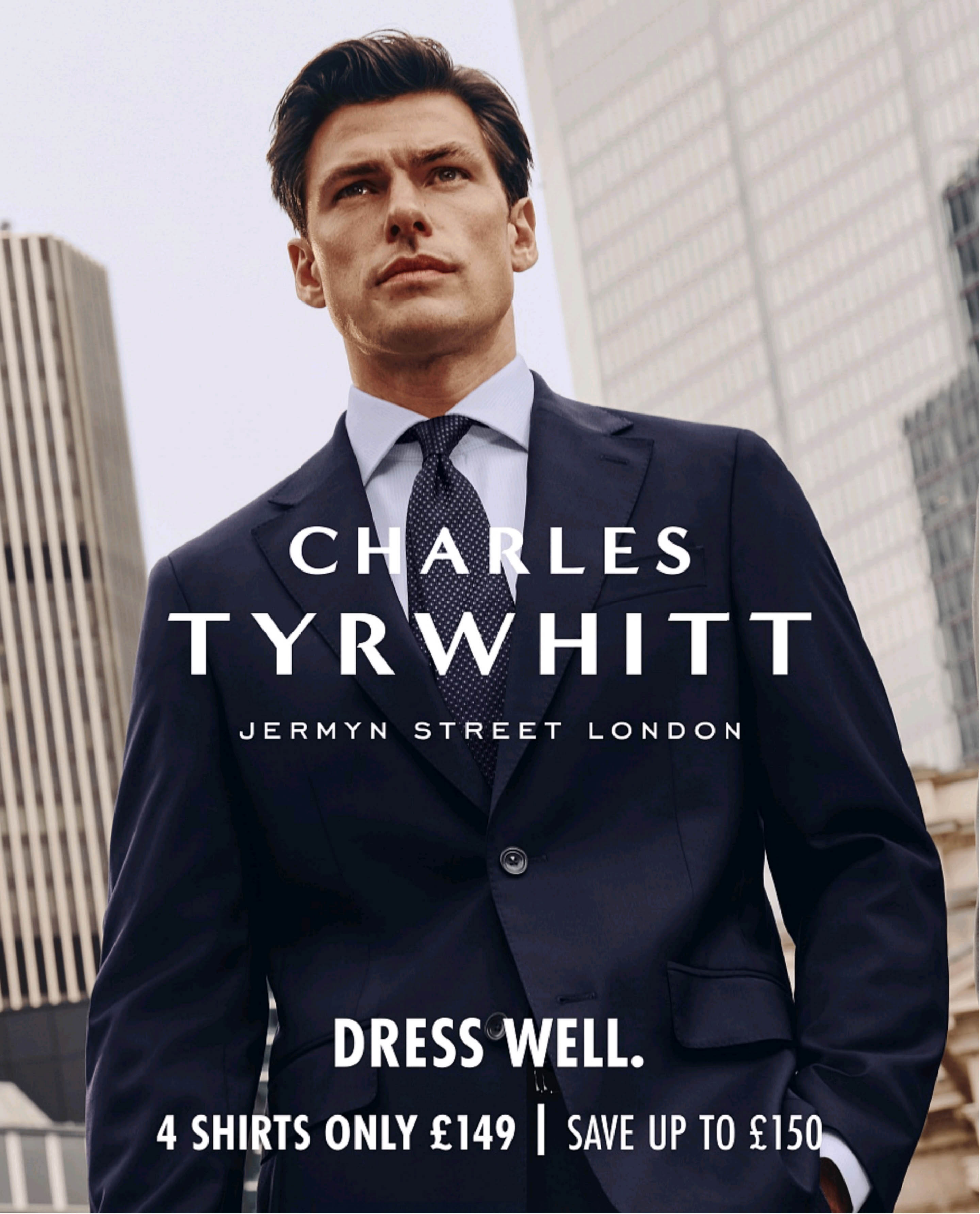
That distinction has a long pedigree; philosophers have argued for centuries about what real freedom means. I hadn't thought of this dispute for a long time when Sandel's name popped up in my inbox. But I was wrong to forget about it. Ideas shape politics, and a consumerist conception of freedom suited the political entrepreneurs of the 1990s perfectly. Yet it is clear now that a sense of disempowerment has been building up in western societies over time.

I suggested to Sandel that Rawlsian liberalism had laid the ground for the "Third Way", the predominantly centrist political position adopted by social democratic parties in the 1990s, led by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, and quickly followed by the Nordic and German labour parties. Once justice became seen as primarily a matter of securing a fair distribution of material rewards and political freedoms, the way to a technocratic embrace of market mechanisms and economic globalisation was a short one for the new centre-left.

Sandel agreed. While a more traditionally social democratic interpretation of Rawls had also been possible, he said, it was the market-friendly liberalism that won the day. Centre-left parties began to use market incentives as the governance tool of first resort. They often embraced privatisation, and designed welfare reforms to make it less rewarding to stay out of work. The much-quoted Peter Mandelson line about New Labour being "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich, so long as they pay their taxes" was the quintessential expression of this version of Rawlsian liberalism.

It would be wrong to blame Rawls outright for these political outcomes. One academic friend I consulted bristled at the suggestion, emphasising "the part of *Theory of Justice* that nobody reads", where Rawls says society must provide "the social bases of self-respect". It was the rise of economics that led politics astray, this friend said. Yet there was an undeniable congeniality between Rawlsian liberalism and a certain kind of economist's thinking. After all, if justice simply requires the arrangements where the poorest get as much as possible, then it's a matter for economists to find out which arrangements those are. Back then, most economists believed the answer was lightly regulated markets and globalisation, coupled with solid redistribution.

Meanwhile, communitarianism fuelled its own kind of political momentum. Its deep respect for group rights and identity expression informed the debate on multiculturalism through the 1990s and 2000s, often encouraging a benign neglect of value clashes between cultures, and rolling the pitch for the identity politics that would eventually convulse parts of the left and inflame parts of the right. Sandel and I agreed that, in a strange way, both the liberal and the communitarian strand of politics ended up abdicating from serious engagement with democratic pluralism.


CHARLES
TYRWHITT
JERMYN STREET LONDON
DRESS WELL.
4 SHIRTS ONLY £149 | SAVE UP TO £150

WE HAVE INTERNALISED THE ARGUMENTS FOR THE SYSTEM WE GRADUATED INTO, BUT THAT DOESN'T CHANGE THE FACT THEY ARE SELF-SERVING

Sandel's focus was mostly on what he calls liberalism's "toleration of avoidance". Here he made an important claim, that the appeal of markets to post-1989 centrists was not just that "markets deliver the goods" in the sense that growth would pay for redistribution. "There was a deeper source of the appeal," he said, which was that turning to the market "seemed to spare politicians and parties from engaging in messy, controversial debates about how to value goods - what contributions to the economy contribute the greatest value, where to allocate capital among competing public purposes". In short, technocratic management was preferred to raw political disagreement.

Sandel's *j'accuse* is that this kind of liberalism took what should have been the most political questions out of politics, leaving them to be settled by market mechanisms. I proposed that this was similar to the appeal of "effective altruism", the neo-utilitarian moral theory popular among students and tech bros, which reduces moral questions to basic calculations of effectiveness. "Exactly," he said.

In an updated edition of *Democracy's Discontent*, Sandel gives the example of Barack Obama's approach to the 2008 financial crisis. "By standing between the bankers and 'the pitchforks'," as the public demanded legal limits on bonuses and no bail-outs for banks, "Obama sought to mollify the public outrage, rather than give it voice. [He] treated the financial crisis as a technical problem for experts to solve, not a civic question about the role of finance in democratic life."

Meanwhile, communitarianism often heightened a sense of separateness. As its political expression in identity politics became more inward-looking, it tended to encourage society's fragmentation into group-based identities. Sandel agreed that in both camps there was "a kind of avoidance [of] moral contestation", rather than a "pluralism of engagement with moral disagreement" over how to value social practices, or the contribution of different jobs to the economy, or cultural identities.

If this is right, it is clear to see why both views would struggle as globalisation intensified. Since globalisation lowers barriers to all kinds of human contact, it is natural to expect pluralism to increase in economically open societies. But the causality runs the other way too. If markets are the solution to pluralism, then more pluralism calls for more markets. And if identity politics separates communities based on identity markers, it also encourages tighter cross-border links as these identities crisscross national divisions.

By now, Sandel and I were almost egging each other on in our respective pessimisms. I came to think this "tolerance of moral avoidance" had put us on a path to conflict. In the communitarian version, groups are set up against one another in a zero-sum game: if there is no common political project, success for one group must end up being seen as a defeat for others. Think of the affirmative action debate. In the market-liberal version, a group to whom the market denies what they think they are due will reject it as a justification for their plight. Think of America's white working class. Either way, some group will eventually knock over the table.

"Could I add an elaboration of that point?" Sandel said. "One way of seeing how a toleration of avoidance leads to conflict is that when we give up on engaging with moral disagreements… we create a moral void at the heart of public discourse." That, in his view, has been the cost of the politics we have seen since the 1990s. "Democratic citizens can't abide for long a public discourse empty of larger moral meaning." Sooner or later that void would have to be filled by "narrow, intolerant, dangerous moralisms of two kinds: religious fundamentalism or hypernationalism. And that's exactly what we've seen."

IV. GUILT

It is proof of Sandel's generosity that he presumes his opponents have principled grounds for their arguments. I can be less generous about my own cohort, whose working life began just as the rewards for those at the top took off. We may have internalised arguments for the success of the system we graduated into, but that does not change one fact: those arguments are self-serving.

One derivation of market-friendly liberalism Sandel has long questioned is meritocracy, the idea that society should be organised to give the most able the advancement they deserve. I remember how he would warn us teaching fellows that in the classes debating distributive justice, undergraduates would all preach meritocracy. They were adamant they had earned their Harvard places through hard work alone. In the lecture hall, Sandel would then ask the 800 or so assembled undergraduates to raise their hand if they were their parents' first (or only) child. He still does this today, and when he does, "75 to 80 per cent of the students raise their hands and there's an audible gasp when they look around and notice that". The overrepresentation (more than half of US children are second born or later), combined with plausible reasons why birth order matters for parental attention and other advantages, is a powerful prompt for Sandel's students to rethink whether they can really claim meritocratic achievement.

The actual distribution of elite college places and other gateways to success is, of course, far from meritocratic. But Sandel's criticism applies to meritocracy even when it succeeds, perhaps especially then. In what Sandel terms "the rhetoric of rising", the moral goal is simply that everyone should go as high as their talents and hard work will carry them. But when we ask whether people have deserved their positions in an unequal society we tend not to ask whether a good society is compatible with inequality. The value that different jobs contribute to a society is left for the supposedly "neutral" labour markets to discover. Sandel would say this is exactly the type of question that cannot be outsourced from a political economy that is "hospitable to self-government". In his 2020 book *The Tyranny of Merit*, Sandel points out that meritocracy adds insult to injury by suggesting that society's losers deserve their positions.

That is not the only self-serving position for elites to hold. The Third Way preached globalisation as a "post-ideological" or "post-partisan" stance, Sandel told me. "But of course it barely concealed a contestable moral and political claim." It cast those who protested against economic openness as atavistic "defenders of the narrow, parochial, and intolerant". The implication, Sandel thought, was that contesting globalisation was "on a par with bigotry".

> THE POPULIST BACKLASH WILL NOT FULFIL THE DESIRES OR ANSWER THE GRIEVANCES THAT CALLED IT INTO BEING. SO WHAT THEN?

Then there was what Sandel calls "the skyboxification of public life", a reference to corporate boxes in sports stadiums. Sports events were once a class-mixing experience. Ticket price differences were modest. "Everyone had to stand in the same long queues to use the bathroom, everybody had to drink the same stale beer and eat the same hot dogs. When it rained, everyone got wet. But with the advent of luxury skyboxes, that no longer was the case." It's a specific example of what he calls one of the most corrosive effects of growing inequality: that winners and losers increasingly "live separate lives". This is not just a matter of distributive justice, of unequal incomes, but that we lose the "chance encounters" [that] remind us of our common citizenship, "of what it is we share". How many of us at the winning end of these developments have given much thought to what we have collectively lost in the process?

V. REDEMPTION?

One question I was eager to discuss with Sandel was about the road not taken. What if voters and politicians had made choices more in line with his recommendations? That's a reflection on what could have been, whether we might have been spared some of today's turmoil. But the more urgent question is what we are to do now, if it is not too late.

Many of Sandel's arguments are today wielded by the articulate face of the Maga movement. Trump's radical actions are justified as necessary to revalorise American communities, elevate the dignity of work over the value of consumption, restore traditional values, or end the false justifications for elevating a privileged, credentialled class. His administration's attack on universities, including Harvard, advances arguments that sound very similar to how Sandel talks about meritocracy.

Sandel is lucid about what's going on here, seeing nothing principled about Trump's attack, which is an attempt "to exert power over the main independent institutions of civil society that would otherwise offer a check on the kind of power he's seeking". But he also worries that elite universities "have allowed ourselves to become conscripted as sorting machines for a market-driven meritocratic society". This state of affairs is "crowding out the intrinsic educational mission that makes higher education higher", he argues. Straying from that mission creates an opening for Trump's attacks.

So I asked Sandel what he thought an economy hospitable to civic flourishing might look like. I did not expect a worked-out policy programme; that is not what a political philosopher's work entails. But he offered a series of examples which illustrate how today's politicians could think seriously about the civic consequences of economic power.

For a start he would combat "skyboxification", removing tax deductibility for such corporate hospitality. This might seem a trivial detail but it isn't just about fairness, he said. It is also about "honouring what it is we share when we go to root for the local football team". This is vintage Sandel, recalling his seminars debating whether the moral meaning of goods can survive being allocated (only) by free markets. He would also tighten corporate tax loopholes, but on the basis of "economic patriotism", arguing that the companies using them are turning their backs on the country that made their profits possible.

He wants measures against "financialisation", by which I take him to mean both the role of private finance in allocating capital and the political status and influence of financiers. His objection is that finance misvalues contributions to society and pre-empts political deliberation about how to value different kinds of work. This leads him to support a financial transaction tax on speculative or extractive capital, and cutting taxes on work. He would also ban phones in schools, and have a debate on Australian-style social media restrictions or a ban on targeted digital ads, asking whether "this is damaging to the kind of human flourishing and character formation we want for our kids".

What about Joe Biden's term in office, which had seemed a significant departure from the previous consensus? Sandel praised Biden's revival of antitrust, his step back from "neoliberal globalisation", his subsidies for industrial construction and his focus on the dignity of work over a "rhetoric of rising". And yet, he judged, "it didn't add up to a new political economy of citizenship" because Biden, unlike his inspiration Franklin Roosevelt, "was not able to articulate a new politics of the common good".

As the New Year arrived and our conversations reached their conclusion, one fault line remained: the "open versus closed economies" debate. I think Sandel is correct that it was wrong to disdain those on the "closed" side of the divide. Yet, all these years later, I still will not give up the view that there is something precious about deepening economic exchange between nations. I suggested to Sandel that he and his fellow critics have a tendency to run together "globalisation", "neoliberalism", "financialisation", "market faith" and "value neutrality" as so many names for a single flawed system. In my 2020 book, *Economics of Belonging*, I tried to identify economic policies governments could use to make all their citizens feel empowered again. I argued that you can combine much better policies for social cohesion at home while keeping your economy integrated with the rest of the world, as has been shown in Scandinavia and other parts of Europe. If Sandel has overlooked the possibility, is this because he leans too exclusively on the US experience?

Sandel did not push back too hard, beyond pointing to the existence of populist insurgencies in Europe. But this disagreement is, of course, the sort of contest between moral views that he welcomes. His priority is to have political and policy practices that don't exclude from deliberation competing views about how we ought to live our lives. From that, he invites us to believe that better policies – and a more cohesive polity – could emerge.

We agreed that the current populist backlash will not fulfil the desires or answer the grievances that called it into being. So what then? Sandel sees two possibilities. In one future, the disappointment creates an opening for renewal, for creating "a morally more robust civic life". But that depends on the "moral and political imagination of those who would offer an alternative to Maga and Trump". Then there is a darker scenario, where the authoritarian alternatives consolidate their hold on the angry and disillusioned. Which way we go, he says, "is the open question, the most important question of our time". FT

Martin Sandbu is the FT's European economics commentator

BEACHCOMBER
RESORTS & HOTELS
BE happy
EARTHCHECK
GOLD CERTIFIED

Escape to where happiness flows in every moment! Our resorts are the perfect backdrop for endless laughter and smiles. Embrace every day with those you love, creating memories that echo in your heart.

#MAURITIUS
#BeachcomberExperience

INFORMATION
on beachcomber.com
or through your travel agency

THE BEACHCOMBER RESORTS & HOTELS COLLECTION ROYAL PALM · DINAROBIN · PARADIS · TROU AUX BICHES · SHANDRANI · VICTORIA · CANONNIER · MAURICIA

A voyage around my broth

s best known as a poet and
of On Earth We're Briefly
epistolary novel in which a
erican man addresses his
er. But Vuong is also a
hen he was 19, he borrowed a
d over the next few years took
other at her nail salon and the
postindustrial landscape around their home in Connecticut. In a new photobook, he writes:

> **One day, flipping through a stack of prints I had shared with her, my mother paused and looked at me with an expression I still can't name.**
> **"What's wrong, Ma?"**
> **She shook her head, though she was smiling.**
> **"I just... I just didn't know our life was so damn sad."**
> **I started taking photographs as a way to make our lives legible to my mother. And my mother's looking made the elegy legible in my work.**

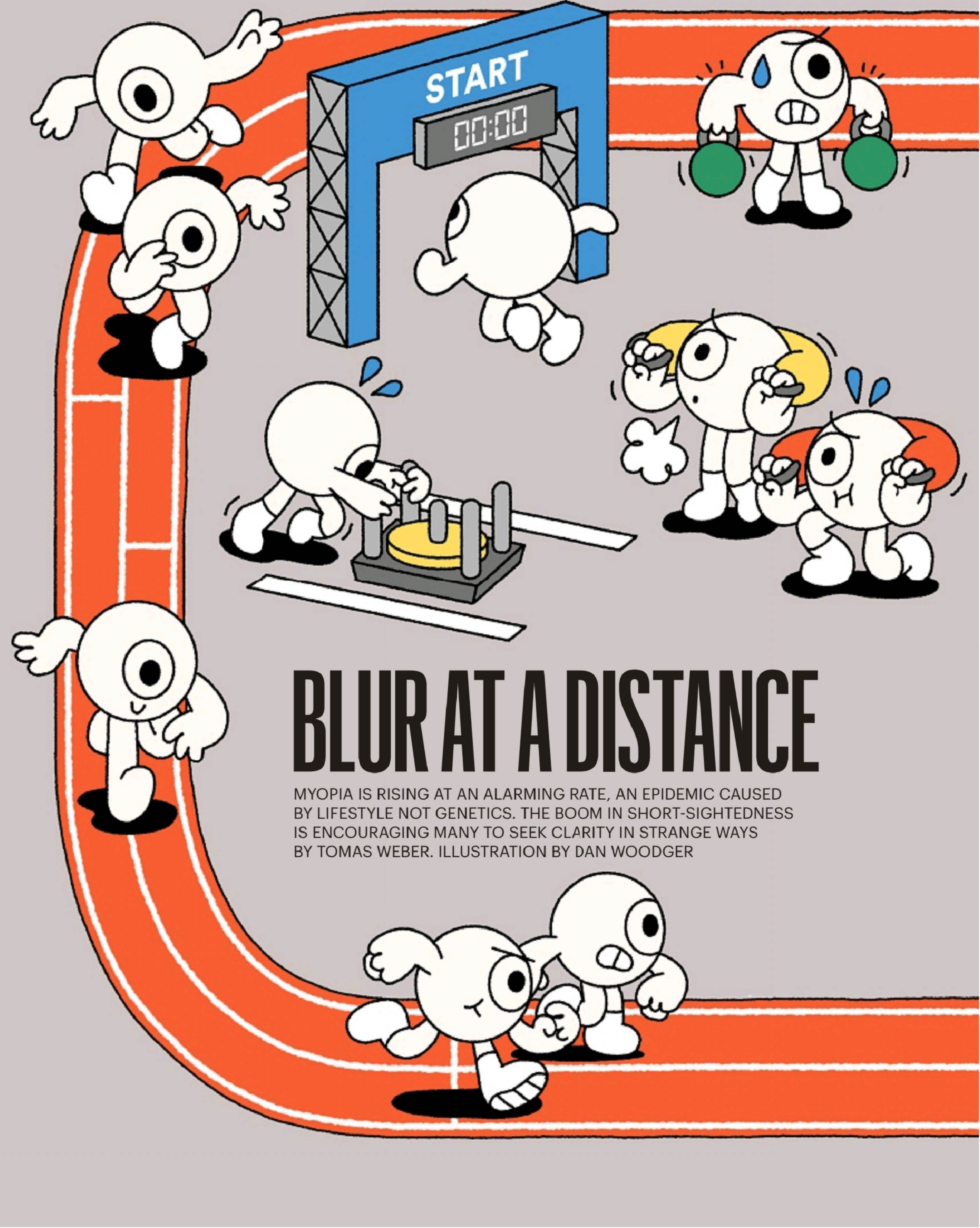
The book from which the following photographs are taken documents the period after Vuong's mother died, when his brother, nine years his junior, came to live with him.

The photographs form part of the exhibition "Ocean Vuong: Sống" at CPW, Kingston, New York, which runs until May 10. The book is co-published by CPW Press and 1080 Press

"My brother was born on a chilly November evening in 1997, when I was 9 years old. We were born to different fathers – our mother, Rose (Hồng), was the only bridge between us" – *Ocean Vuong*

"Unlike writing, which is a vocation mired with maybes, the camera, for all of its complex mechanisms, can only say yes. Photography is, for me, a medium of unanimous affirmation, the shutter creating a yes so total, so entire, nothing in its frame can be denied presence"
– OV

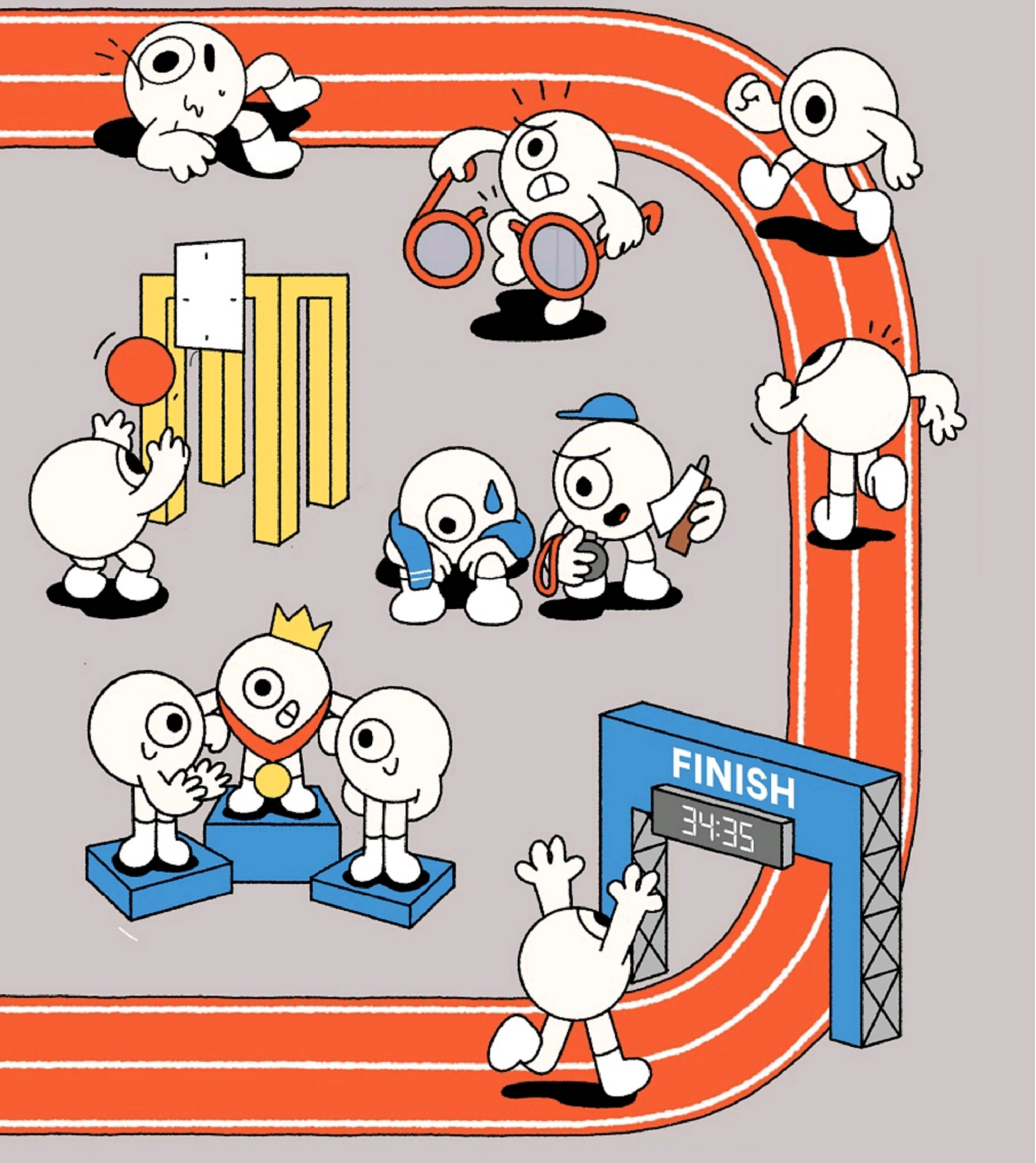
"If, as Garry Winogrand has said, we take photographs to see how the world looks when photographed, I make pictures of my brother to see the parts in him I cannot see in real time, my eyes too myopic, fleeting or faulty" – *OV*



BLUR AT A DISTANCE

MYOPIA IS RISING AT AN ALARMING RATE, AN EPIDEMIC CAUSED BY LIFESTYLE NOT GENETICS. THE BOOM IN SHORT-SIGHTEDNESS IS ENCOURAGING MANY TO SEEK CLARITY IN STRANGE WAYS

BY TOMAS WEBER. ILLUSTRATION BY DAN WOODGER


FINISH
34:35

IT SEEMED LIKE A BRIGHT AND CLEAR OCTOBER MORNING

along New Hampshire's Merrimack River, but Mike Craumer couldn't be sure. As usual, he was not wearing his contact lenses, so the world beyond his arm's length was a blur. Craumer was hoping that would not be the case for too much longer.

For several weeks leading up to that autumn day in 2020, the 35-year-old software engineer had been attempting to reverse his short-sightedness. He was one of a growing number of people subscribing to the notion that it is possible to correct even very poor vision (Craumer's had been measured by an optometrist at -6 in the left eye and -6.25 in the right) with "biohacking" techniques, including tensing and relaxing the eyes, focusing on distant objects or simply *imagining* seeing the world in full clarity.

Until now, he had been struggling. Standing on the river bank, he could just about make out the shape of his black labrador roaming through the woods and the trees dissolving into autumn colours. The river itself, perhaps glistening in the sunlight, was just a blue haze. Craumer waded in. "There's something about coming out of the water that just seems to generate clarity," he told me later. As he ducked his head into the river, the water felt soothing on his eyes. But then, as he straightened back up, he noticed something remarkable. The scene around him was definitely becoming sharper.

Reality is getting foggier. If, as the philosopher Walter Benjamin believed, the way we see is connected to the way we live, that people started to see the world differently, had new experiences of vision as we began driving cars, taking photographs and filming videos, then the experience that most defines our current screen-encumbered moment is blur at a distance. A 2016 study estimated that by 2020 2.6 billion people would suffer from myopia globally, 50 per cent more than in 2000. By 2050, the study found, that number is set to double to nearly five billion. Scientists used to believe myopia was mostly genetic in origin, but research over the past few decades has conclusively pinned this epidemic of nearsightedness on our lifestyles.

Spending too much time indoors and in front of screens stretches out our eyeballs, turning them from spherical into something more egg-like, disrupting how light moves through the optical system and causing far-off objects to look hazy. The reasons for this are not fully understood. Some scientists think the high contrast of screens might play a role. But experts agree that sunlight triggers dopamine, which tells the eye to stop growing. Too much time indoors, and the eye doesn't know when to stop.

Sometimes, blur is the least of a myope's problems. As short-sighted people age, their misshapen eyes risk causing serious diseases, including retinal detachments that can lead to blindness. The possibility that half the world's population may be nearsighted by 2050 is a "time bomb" that threatens blindness on a mass scale, ophthalmologist and Emory University professor Machelle Pardue told me. Spending more time outdoors can hold off myopia for a while in children. Relaxation techniques, too, can help relieve eye strain, which is caused by focusing for long periods. But once the eyeball has become elongated, most ophthalmologists agree it cannot be reversed without surgery.

This is a fate more and more people are refusing to accept. The boom in short-sightedness is encouraging many to seek clarity in strange ways, believing myopia and other eye problems can be fixed without corrective lenses or surgery. Inspired by biohacking podcasters and wellness influencers, including American neuroscientist Andrew Huberman and tech entrepreneur Dave Asprey (who runs a chain of "human upgrade centres" across the US), and spurred on by the prevailing suspicion of mainstream medicine under the Trump administration, legions of myopes and hyperopes, presbyopes and amblyopes (the near- and the far-sighted, the ageing-eyed and the lazy-eyed) are trying to seize back control from their tech addictions, from mainstream optometry and the £108bn global lens industry. What they want to achieve is something every eye doctor I spoke to assured me was physically impossible: to train themselves to see clearly again. It was like trying to will yourself taller. "You can't meditate your way into being 6ft 2in," said Donald Mutti, an optometrist at Ohio State University. "It just can't happen."

CLOSE YOUR EYES AND PICTURE THE DARKest of blacks. Now imagine a shade even darker than that. No, even darker. Or conceive of the most vivid bunch of red roses you can muster and drink in all of the detail – the guard petals peeling back, the dense inner spiral, the tips of the thorns. Do this often enough and, one day, a clearer world might be there waiting when you open your eyes.

Many vision biohackers take the view, first proposed by William Bates, a renegade ophthalmologist who worked in New York at the turn of the 20th century, that eye problems like myopia are due not to the immutable shapes of eyeballs but instead stem from a sort of chronic strain, inner blockage, spiritual sickness, even failure of imagination. Glasses and contact lenses, they believe, are overprescribed. The idea that eyesight naturally declines over time is incompatible with biohackers' trust in near-perpetual bodily optimisation. Meditation and eye yoga can supposedly hack vision back to sharpness, manifesting more of the world into lucidity. "If you twisted an ankle," I was told by one natural-vision coach, who claimed she'd improved her -8 myopic eyes to the point where she no longer needs glasses at all, "would you just think, 'This is it?'"

Many holistic-health proponents believe sharpening your vision could also help mend your mind, perhaps even help put the world to rights. Rangan Chatterjee, until recently a practising GP and the resident doctor on the morning TV show *BBC Breakfast*, links poor vision to high stress levels, lack of empathy, phone addiction, even to angry or tunnel-visioned ways of interacting online. "Maybe," said Chatterjee recently on *Feel Better, Live More,* his health podcast that he claims is Europe's most successful, "if more and more of us could improve our visual processing... it could help make the world a kinder... place."

Chatterjee's guest on that episode was the controversial Maryland optometrist Bryce Appelbaum, who treats problems most of his colleagues say cannot be improved and believes "vision is the new microbiome".

After spending several days in Appelbaum's vision-improvement clinic, Chatterjee credited the rebel optometrist with helping reduce his own myopia.

Back in New Hampshire, Craumer was having his own revelation. As he swam in the river, he noticed the trees along the bank coming into focus. He waded out of the water, sat down on a log and looked around. The rocks, he saw, were becoming clear. He could see vivid patterns emerging from the granite. On the ground were individual grains of sand! He took in the sharpened landscape and wondered if he'd already been cured.

But then, worried he was late for work, Craumer checked the time on his phone. As he looked back up, the world was once again a haze. The breakthrough had lasted about 15 seconds, but Craumer knew it meant he was on the right track. Now, it was simply a matter of making that glossy world he'd glimpsed permanent. He walked back to his house to begin the working day, inserting his contact lenses so he could see his computer screen.

Craumer's story was one of many I'd been hearing. People were claiming to be fixing their eyesight naturally and I wanted to know what was going on. So last summer, I signed up for the International Conference of Holistic Vision, which would be the largest gathering in the community's history, held in October in Valencia, Spain. After years in the shadows, an organiser told me, the community's ideas were finally catching on.

Short-sighted for most of my adult life, I wondered, perhaps against my better judgment, if biohacking techniques could make a difference. And while it all seemed rather suspect, even a little unseemly, the myopia surge was making me worried – about inexorable sensory decline, about a degradation of vision hastened by the attention-industrial complex. I was also curious, at a time when our vision is collectively worsening, about the motivations of this coterie trying to bring things into greater focus through sheer force of will.

LAST OCTOBER, I ARRIVED AT THE CONFERENCE with 300 or so other attendees, all of us filling a vast, bright room inside a building on the shore. A racing yacht, its hull wrapped in plastic, was moored up against the floor-to-ceiling windows and blocked our view of the sea.

Over the next five days, there would be a packed schedule of vision-yoga workshops, group eye-therapy sessions and talks about shifting mindsets. The miraculously ex-blind were here, I'd heard, with driving licences in their pockets. I watched people's eyes widen as they recognised fellow biohackers from previous gatherings. Many were wearing the official conference T-shirt, its SEE AND BE SEEN slogan arranged in the shape of an eye chart on their backs. Failing to count a single pair of glasses, I slipped my own frames into my shirt pocket and took my seat for the first workshop of the day.

BATES BELIEVED MYOPIA WAS CAUSED BY AN EPIDEMIC OF MENTAL STRAIN THAT CORRECTIVE LENSES WERE WORSENING

Carme Llimargas, a Spanish vision coach dressed in a white linen dress, with bare feet and a silver bob, was there to lead a morning workshop called Heal your Vision, Heal your Life. Llimargas was teaching us how to remove our spiritual blockages to clear vision. She told everybody to stand up with their eyes closed and sway from side to side, on a floor covered in pink, yellow and blue balloons.

Part of the problem, Llimargas said, was that living in states of anxiety was causing our vision to fog up. "We need to programme ourselves to see clearly," she said. "Nothing is impossible." I noticed one attendee repeat a mantra under her breath: "I know I can see, I know I can see." Outside, in the concrete yard beside the yacht, a woman was turning her head slowly back and forth in the sun, her eyes closed – a relaxation ritual called "sunning". We were told to link arms, form a circle, close our eyes and breathe deeply. After several minutes, Llimargas asked us to open our eyes. "Maybe we can see more clearly now," she said. Most people nodded.

After a concluding *namaste*, it was time for lunch. Over my tortilla, I complained to another biohacker that I'd noticed no improvement in my visual acuity. The biohacker, an American vision coach in his thirties who said his eyesight had already slightly improved since the morning, explained the key to clarity was faith. Observing reality, the natural-vision people believed, was a largely mental act, an exercise in conjuring clarity out of your head.

In some ways it was an instinctive idea. To believe we live in a shared world that can be measured and understood, you first must grasp how it becomes visible, which is not intuitively clear. Plato believed that we saw the world thanks to rays shooting out of our eyes. Other ancient philosophers thought objects sent out tiny replicas of themselves which wafted through the air and landed in the eyes.

Confusion lasted until the 11th century, when the Iraqi mathematician, astronomer and physicist Ibn al-Haytham, known as the father of modern optics, first explained how light bounces off objects before reaching the eyes, to be interpreted by the brain. In revealing that our perception of the world could be explained by geometrical rules, he demonstrated that the natural world could be precisely calculated, a major step towards mathematical theories of reality. With optics, wrote the historian Theresa Levitt, "the world became eminently legible".

Not for the myopes, though, who had to wait until the 14th century for their first concave eyeglass. How the glasses worked was a mystery, until Johannes Kepler, the German astronomer, explained in 1604 that light reaches its focal point too soon inside myopic (and therefore elongated) eyes, landing in front of the retina rather than directly upon it. Concave lenses focused the light a little further back. Back then, myopia was rare. It wasn't until the industrial revolution that German doctors noticed a rapid increase in the problem, which studies have since linked to the introduction of compulsory education.

Some casualties of myopia, such as Claude Monet, embraced the condition. When the painter of hazy scenes tried on a pair of spectacles, he was reportedly dismayed by the world's hard edges (towards the end of his life Monet developed cateracts, and had to wear corrective glasses). Paul Cézanne, "an artist exasperated by a defective vision… who discovered the basis of a new art", in the words of one 19th-century critic, refused to wear glasses. Other myopes believed glasses actively damaged eyesight, acting as a crutch while worsening the underlying causes of visual problems. Like the vision coach from Istanbul at the conference, who recounted to me the story of being sued by the Turkish government for practising medicine without a licence (she won the case). Or the Israeli therapist who went from severe myopia to driving at night without glasses and investigated the "inner emotional roots" of her patients' vision problems by "conversing with the eyes".

Or like Craumer, who I spotted on the second day standing next to the conference merch table wearing a pair of pinhole glasses on his forehead (glasses with a black plastic grating through which small beams of light enter to help reduce blur). The burly American's beard was scraggly, his eyes the colour of light-wash denim. Inches away from his nose, he was holding a book called *A New World of Seeing*. Intrigued, I followed him out into the yard for lunch.

FIVE YEARS AGO, CRAUMER TOLD ME WHILE SPREADING peanut butter across a slice of bread, he looked up at the stars and decided the heavens couldn't have been this hazy to his ancestors. "Something seemed off," he said. "Something didn't seem natural." As he said this, I noticed he had a dead-eyed look. He was, chillingly, gazing not at me but straight through me. "I feel like you're looking past me," I said. "As if I'm not here." Craumer admitted that whenever he's outdoors, he likes to make the most of it by focusing his eyes steadfastly on the distance, even when an object – such as another person – is in the way.

Craumer discovered the YouTube videos of Nathan Oxenfeld, a vision-biohacking influencer from Vermont, who introduced him to the teachings of vision biohacking's founding father, Bates, who claimed to have cured his own poor eyesight. While researching his 1920 book, *Perfect Sight Without Glasses*, Bates brought a retinoscope to the Central Park Zoo, where he measured the optics of the eyes of an elephant, a monkey and a Cape buffalo. He supposed that each animal became myopic when anxious. Problems like myopia, Bates came to believe, were caused by an epidemic of mental strain that corrective lenses were worsening. He theorised that tension in the muscles surrounding the eye causes them to press down upon the eyeball and flatten it, like squeezing a balloon. (Opthamologists say such a phenomenon is anatomically impossible.)

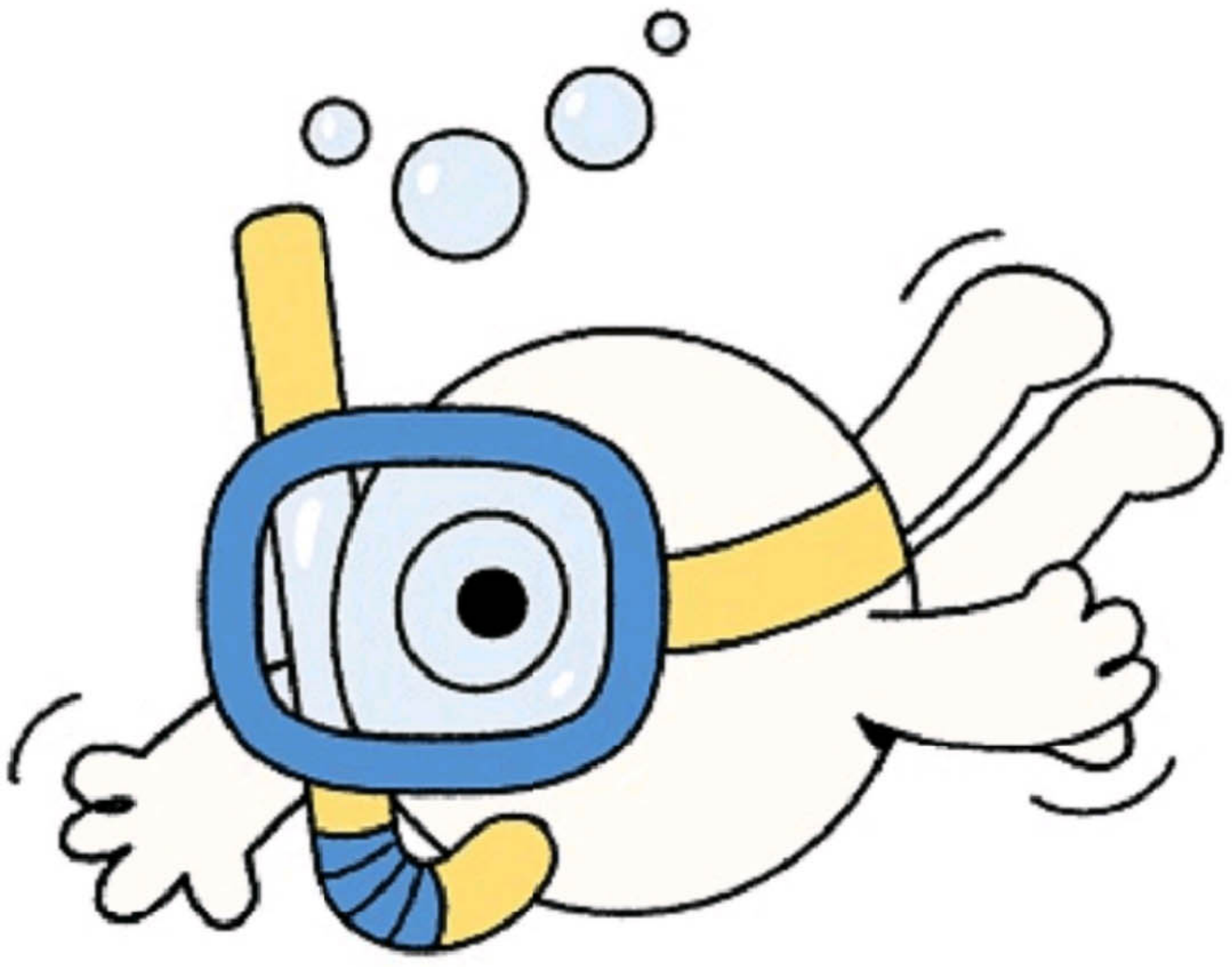
Bates also believed a good memory was essential to seeing clearly. One of his patients, he wrote, had cured her short-sightedness by vividly recalling a buttercup she once saw – an achievement that helped cement Bates's faith in memory's curative power, even as he himself experienced bouts of prolonged memory loss that led to his occasional disappearance. In 1902, months after vanishing from New York without warning, his wife found him working in London's Charing Cross Hospital as an assistant, having been admitted in a fugue state. He spent a couple of nights recuperating in the Savoy hotel before vanishing again and turning up, years later, as a small-town eye doctor in North Dakota.

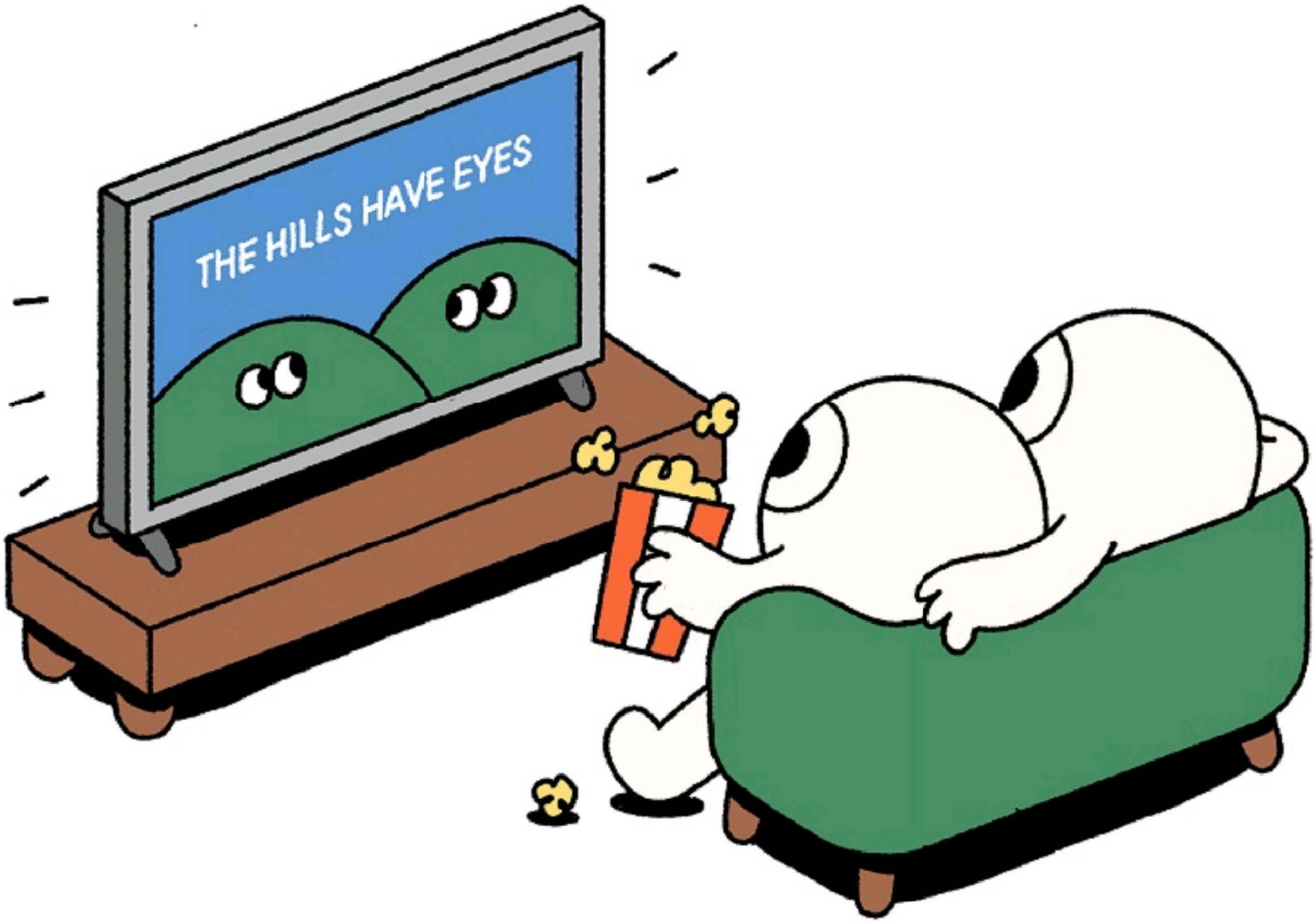
For Bates, telling lies or imagining things that didn't exist, such as "a blue sun" could also obscure one's vision. The real sun, meanwhile, had in his view been a victim of ophthalmological slander. With fully relaxed eyes, Bates assured his patients, they would be able to stare at it for hours without harm or discomfort. Techniques for achieving such relaxation included palming, swaying, closing one's eyes in the sun and shifting one's gaze from side to side.

With the help of Bates's techniques, and after achieving that fleeting moment of clarity in a New Hampshire river in 2020, Craumer worked relentlessly to improve his vision. Four years later, his world had become a little clearer, he told me. He took an eye test. His myopia prescription, his optometrist found, had dropped by 1.5 diopters in the right eye, and 1.75 in the left. (Diopters are the unit used to calculate the strength of an optical lens.) Craumer showed me a picture of the two prescriptions, but when I told eye doctors his story, they all doubted myopic eyes could ever improve so dramatically.

It was becoming a familiar tale. In Valencia, dozens of people, from wellness bros and eye yogis to renegade ophthalmologists, from fringe-medicine faithful and spiritual seekers to the nearly blind and the newly healed, all swore they'd improved their vision naturally. Most did so while making direct eye contact with me and without blinking (which I took as a sign of their honesty). Some, like Craumer, even had the documents to prove it. It sounded fantastical. But then I had an odd flash of clarity of my own that forced me to consider whether I might now be one of them.

DURING ONE WORKSHOP, A VISION COACH from Tennessee called Gloria Ginn asked us to sit and "palm" for several minutes. Before we started, I looked over at the emergency exit sign above the door. It was blurry. After covering my closed eyes with my palms for a few minutes, I opened them, blinked, and yawned. The sign shifted into focus for a couple of seconds. I could make out the letters SALIDA DE EMERGENCIA. It was the furthest I could ever remember seeing without my glasses.





CRAUMER FOCUSES HIS EYES STEADFASTLY ON THE DISTANCE, EVEN WHEN AN OBJECT – SUCH AS ANOTHER PERSON – IS IN THE WAY

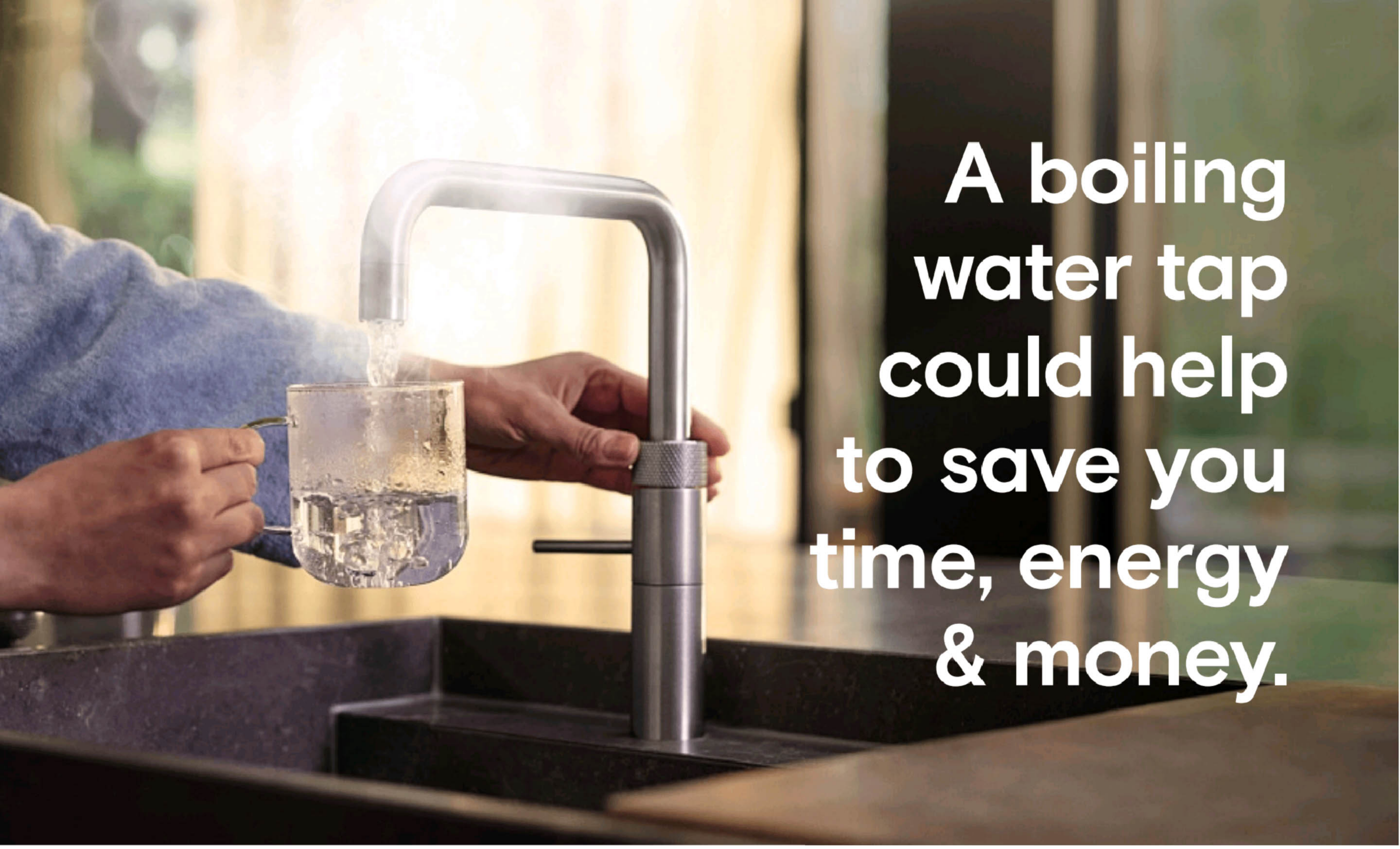
Conventional ophthalmology had a few different takes on my lucid flash. Most eye doctors I asked about it suggested that, because I was then in a state of relaxation, the tension in my ciliary muscles, which control the focusing of the lenses, could have been temporarily relieved. Such tension, they told me, can give rise to blurry distance vision, a condition known as "pseudomyopia". Biohacking techniques could never cure true myopia, which is caused by the structure of the eye, but it was possible that some biohacking techniques could relieve pseudomyopia.

Perhaps some of the biohackers – so convinced of their ability to manifest the world into clarity in defiance of facts like the anatomical structure of the eye – had never had myopia at all. Others, a couple of ophthalmologists told me, might have adapted to the blur and now believe they see more clearly than they do. Still, the biohackers' obsession with taking the visible world by the reins was something I could understand. A couple of the people I met seemed to enjoy telling me how inspiring it was to see all around you the rewards of your achievement – like being deeply moved by a view that comes at the end of a long and arduous hike, but that would leave you cold if seen through a car window.

After the revelation of the emergency-exit sign, I took the lift to the building's roof terrace. I wanted to see how far I could now see into the distance without my glasses. It was a warm and breezy evening and the sky was pink. Behind me were dusty shadows of distant mountains. I looked out across the sea, towards the horizon, but the view was so blurry that I put my glasses back on. Now I saw a small rowboat pass in front of a bright blue freighter loaded with containers. Between them was a person nimbly riding a hydrofoil. Birds were swooping overhead and people were strolling along the promenade past café terraces. It was a beautiful scene. Would it have been more beautiful if I could believe seeing it was my own doing?

I took the lift back down to the ground floor. One of the conference organisers was reciting poetry about the ocean. Around a dozen people were lying on the floor, palming on their yoga mats. I spread my jacket on the ground and lay down alongside them, but I couldn't relax. Screams from the other side of the window were distracting me. I cracked open an eye, turned my head to the side, and peered through a gap in my fingers. Outside, I saw hundreds of biohackers running around with black felt strips hanging down the middle of their faces to divide their fields of vision in two. They were playing catch with tennis balls which they kept dropping and chasing across the yard, crashing into each other, whooping with delight.

I believed some of them had seen genuine improvements in their vision. Others couldn't see much at all. Still, they evidently felt the world was out there, somewhere in the murk, ready to be polished into focus. And that seemed like plenty. FT


A boiling water tap could help to save you time, energy & money.

Interested? Find out more from the comfort of your home.

Sit back and relax while you enjoy a **live, one-on-one demonstration of the revolutionary Quooker** on your smart TV or computer. See it in action as one of our expert team show you how this revolutionary boiling water tap could help save you **time, energy and money** whilst making everyday tasks easier and the kitchen safer for the whole family.

Want to know how it works? How easy is the installation? Or like to know more about specific benefits? Just ask. We'll tailor the session to what matters most to you.

So why not join us live from our Customer Experience Centre, at a time of your choice and experience the innovative Quooker for yourself.

Book your personalised demonstration today!

Scan the QR code to unlock exclusive offers and to arrange a virtual demonstration or visit **quooker.co.uk**

Visit the Experience Centre to see a live demonstration

Beaumont Buildings, Great Ducie Street, Manchester, M3 1PQ

Quooker®

100°C BOILING, CHILLED AND SPARKLING WATER

The tap that does it all

Appetites

Wine

The Loire finds its *gloire*

by JANCIS ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATION *by* DEBORA SZPILMAN

I am ashamed of not having visited any Loire wine region other than Sancerre and Pouilly-sur-Loire for years, despite travelling far and wide in the wine world. Especially since the Loire's time has come. Its fresh, relatively low-alcohol wines and emphasis on whites is what many wine drinkers are currently seeking.

Fortunately for me, however, Chris Hardy held an illuminating tasting in London recently. An ex-wine-buyer for Majestic Wine Warehouses, Hardy took over Charles Sydney Wines, the leading supplier of Loire wines to the UK, in 2016. Of course, his wares are just a snapshot of what's available, but 75 carefully selected producers were represented and nearly 300 wines shown. I decided to concentrate on the dry white still wines, the chief output of Loire vineyards.

The one thing that was striking was the massive contrast between 2024 and 2025 vintages in the Loire. As in Burgundy, the 2024 growing season was horribly cool and wet, a fact reflected in most 2024s at the tasting, which really stood out for their unusual lack of ripeness. Whereas the 2025s, from an early, particularly healthy (though not desperately

JANCIS RECOMMENDS

LOVELY LOIRES

Note that many of these are older vintages of the 2025s tasted recently, but do look out for the 2025s expected in the next few months.

PAYS NANTAIS

- **Taste the Difference Mid Strength 2024 IGP Val de Loire (8.5%)**
  £7.75 WHITE AND ROSÉ SAINSBURY'S (2025 DOM DES HERBAUGES GROLLEAUS' EXPECTED AT WAITROSE IN APRIL)
- **Jérémie Huchet, Chemin des Prières 2023 Muscadet (12%)**
  £12.50 THE WINE SOCIETY
- **Dom de la Combe, Pierre-Henri Gadais Vendange Nocturne 2025 Muscadet (11.5%)**
  2022 IS £12.89 WILDFLOWER WINES, 2019 £14.89 TILLEY'S WINES

SAUVIGNON BLANC

- **Dom Paul Thomas, Raphaël Thomas 2025 Sancerre (13%)**
  2022 IS £22 FREDS DRINKS, 2023 IS £25.90 BON COEUR
- **Dom du Clos St-Martin, I & P Clément 2025 Sancerre (13.5%)**
  2023 IS £32 WINE SOURCE
- **Dom Jean-Max Roger, Étienne Roger 2025 Sancerre (13%)**
  2023 IS £35.95 CHAMPAGNES AND CHÂTEAUX
- **Dom Alphonse Mellot, Génération XIX 2022 Sancerre (13.5%)**
  £64.63 IDEALWINE UK
- **Dom Didier Dagueneau, Louis-Benjamin Dagueneau Silex 2020 Vin de France (13.5%)**
  £165 WINE TASTING ADVENTURE AND OTHERS

CHENIN BLANC

- **Dom des Deux Vallées, Philippe Socheleau 2024 Savennières (12.5%)**
  2022 IS £16.99 AVERYS, SUNDAY TIMES WINE CLUB
- **Dom de la Taille aux Loups, Triple Zéro NV Sparkling Montlouis (12.5%)**
  £26.20 MILLÉSIMA UK, £27.52 JUSTERINIS
- **Dom de la Taille aux Loups, Jean-Philippe Blot, Clos Michet 2024 Montlouis (12%)**
  £31.80 MILLÉSIMA UK
- **Dom de la Taille aux Loups, Jean-Philippe Blot, Clos de la Bretonnière 2024 Vin de France (12%)**
  £36.30 MILLÉSIMA UK
- **Ch Pierre Bise, René Papin 2022 Savennières Roche aux Moines (14.5%)**
  £39.32 LAY & WHEELER
- **Dom de la Taille aux Loups, Jean-Philippe Blot, Clos de Venise 2024 Vin de France (12%)**
  £41.80 MILLÉSIMA UK

TASTING NOTES, SCORES AND SUGGESTED DRINKING DATES FOR THE 2025S ON JANCISROBINSON.COM. INTERNATIONAL STOCKISTS, WINESEARCHER.COM

> It was quite clear that the Loire's dynamic vine growers no longer have to struggle to ripen their grapes as they once did

abundant) vintage, were absolutely charming. The wines shown were being offered to the trade, so it will take a few months for them to make their way on to shelves and lists, but the 2025s really are worth waiting for.

Setting 2024 aside, it was quite clear that in general the Loire's dynamic vine growers no longer have to struggle to ripen their grapes as they once did, and those good enough to be in the Charles Sydney portfolio seem determined to express their particular terroir in the bottle.

These terroirs vary enormously as one travels upriver, from the relatively flat Muscadet region in the hinterland of Nantes, the Pays Nantais, to the very distinct characters of Anjou, Saumur, Touraine with its bluffs of Vouvray and Montlouis, as well as the red wine country of Chinon and Bourgueil. Further east again, there's the completely different rolling landscape of the Central Loire with its popular Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé appellations plus better-value offshoots.

And recently there has been a whole new Loire region added, Volcanic Loire. This is even further upriver in the Auvergne and north of St-Étienne. Producers in the resurgent appellations of St-Pourçain, Côtes d'Auvergne, Côte Roannaise and Côtes du Forez have banded together to promote the region's wines, generally based on volcanic soils.

No white representative from this exciting "new" region was included in the Charles Sydney tasting but there was no shortage of evidence of the confidence and ambition of vignerons in the Loire, a wine region with a particularly strong commitment to sustainable viticulture.

Arguably, the Loire wine region that has seen the greatest transformation is Muscadet, the best-value white-wine region in the world, if you know where to look.

The Melon de Bourgogne grape of Muscadet is a relative of the white burgundy grape Chardonnay and it shows in the best wines of the region. Many of these belong to a new sub-category, Muscadet cru communal, which can have the name of a locally distinctive commune appended to the appellation name. (The words cru communal are not on labels.) At the tasting, François Lieubeau of Famille Lieubeau showed two beautiful 2023s from the communes of Clisson and Goulaine, respectively, just 12 and 12.5 per cent alcohol but intense and deep-flavoured with obvious potential for ageing, and a recommended retail price (RRP) of less than £20.

Quite a bit of Chardonnay itself is now grown in the Muscadet region and I tasted several pretty examples, all sold as IGP Val de Loire and likely to be priced in the UK at between £10 and £12. But they were much less serious wines than the best Muscadets.

Wines were grouped by grape variety (blends are uncommon among Loire whites) and I tasted the Sauvignon Blancs before the Chenin Blancs of Anjou-Saumur. The price difference between a Sancerre or Pouilly-Fumé and other Loire Sauvignon Blancs is extremely marked. While one of my favourite Sauvignons, Dom La Tour Beaumont, Le Fié Gris 2025 Touraine Haut Poitou has a likely UK retail price below £14, the Sancerres and Pouilly-Fumés I tasted would probably vary from £20 to £65. And a lone bottle of the "icon wine" Didier Dagueneau, Silex 2020 on the table – sold not as a Pouilly-Fumé by the late Didier's son Louis-Benjamin but as a Vin de France – carried the dreaded price tag POA (price on application) in the tasting booklet. (See a price and stockist in my recommendations.) Reputation is a wonderful thing – and well earned in the case of Dagueneau.

Three standout 2025 Sancerres are listed in my recommendations but older vintages are easier to find for the moment. The Dom du Clos St-Martin is especially rich and concentrated and, while a dramatic drink, may not sync with some wine lovers' idea of a typical Sancerre. Older vintages of Dom Alphonse Mellot, La Moussière Sancerre, partially aged in oak, are relatively easy to find, especially in cases of six bottles in bond from £160 and up. The 2025 La Moussière (14.5 per cent) starts off rich and then becomes surprisingly elegant.

Nineteenth-generation Mellot's Generation XIX 2022 Sancerre still positively throbs with life but the price may give you a headache.

Best-value Sauvignon Blancs shown, with a likely RRP in the UK of well under £15, were a brace of wines from Reuilly, a mixed farming Sancerre satellite: Matthieu et Renaud Mabillot 2025 Reuilly (13.5 per cent) and Dom de Reuilly, Denis Jamin, Les Coignons 2025 Reuilly (13 per cent). They are far easier to find in France than the UK unfortunately. (Like many Loire wines, the latter rather confusingly carries the name of both property and producer.)

AFTER THE SAUVIGNON BLANCS CAME the Chenin Blancs of the middle stretch of the Loire valley between Muscadet and the Central Loire. The first wine I tasted, Dom des Deux Vallées, Equilibriste 2025 Vin de France, was so good that I immediately concluded that Chenin is vastly superior to Sauvignon, which is a bit unfair. I had previously enjoyed the much less dramatic 2023 vintage of this wine that Waitrose stocked at £8.99 but apparently it never took off. Laithwaites is currently offering the 2024 vintage that I haven't tasted as Equilibrium at £12.99 and is expected to switch to the lovely 2025 in the next month or two.

Honey, apples and straw are all descriptors of Chenin Blanc which, in the Loire, comes in all sweetness levels as well as being the basis of many a sparkling wine. But with warmer summers, the proportion of dry Chenins has increased enormously, with François Chidaine and the late Jacky Blot of Dom de la Taille aux Loups in Montlouis showing how it should be done many years ago.

Blot's son Jean-Philippe was at the tasting and is clearly carrying the torch splendidly. The domaine's Triple Zéro (latest vintage based on 2022) has long been one of France's finest non-champagne sparkling wines, and even Jean-Philippe's 2024 dry whites, which was all he had to show since his 2025s won't be bottled until late spring, showed extremely well. His bottling from Clos de la Bretonnière and the tiny Clos de Venise in Vouvray have to be labelled as Vin de France because they're not vinified in Vouvray. Millésima UK has an excellent range of wines from this talented producer, and they are not overpriced.

I'm a big fan of Savennières, dry Loire Chenin at its most pungent. Dom des Deux Vallées 2024 would make a good introduction to the style, although it's nothing like as smouldering as Pierre Bise's 2022.

And finally, note Jerôme Choblet's hard work on the Grolleau grapes he grows on Dom des Herbauges in the Muscadet region to come up with creditable white, pink and improving red IGP Val de Loire wines that are naturally only 8.5 per cent alcohol. He deserves encouragement.

Review

Mezzogiorno, Westminster

by JAY RAYNER

ILLUSTRATION *by* DANIEL EGNEUS

There is a dizzying contrast between the homely, tumbling lasagne that arrives on the table at the new Italian restaurant inside the Corinthia hotel, and the lantern-jawed bombast of the room in which it is served. There are eight-metre-high ceilings, prodded by thumping great neoclassical columns of a sort Albert Speer might well have admired. The tables are hard and cold and heavy. They have attempted to soften the room's edges with earthenware tones and artfully irregular linen screens, but the latter just look like something from a first world war infirmary where you go to recover from TB. The gorgeous waiters seem forever on the edge of a heel click, and the Leviathan of a wine list has six pages dedicated solely to champagne. Mezzogiorno is an uptight person's version of casual.

And then there's Francesco Mazzei's tottering Lasagna Pastachjna. It's layered with thinly sliced aubergine and pasta sheets as gossamer as a gentleman's pocket handkerchief, and smothered in tumbles of a slow-cooked buttery pork ragù, forming the very best kind of edible landslide. "It is made to Francesco's mum's recipe," the waiter whispers, as he places it on the table, reverentially. For all the room's pomp, the dish has a hugely comforting domesticity. It's like looking under the table at a black-tie dinner to discover the host is wearing fluffy pink slippers.

FIND IT

MEZZOGIORNO BY FRANCESCO MAZZEI

Corinthia Hotel, 10a Northumberland Avenue,
London WC2N 5AE;
020 7930 8181; corinthia.com

Antipasti £6-£26
Primi £18-£39
Secondi £23-£46
Dessert £11-£12

The uneasy setting really is worth accommodating, for the unashamed quality of both the ingredients and the sunlit cooking. But then that's only to be expected, at least by me. I have been a goggle-eyed fan of Mazzei's food since his days amid the linen snowfields and polished glass walls of L'Anima in the City and then at the fatly upholstered Sartoria on Savile Row. There are many great Italian chefs working in London. They all have their virtues, but at the end of this meal I conclude Mazzei is quite simply the best of them. The earthy, jagged edges to his food are heavily inspired by his Calabrian upbringing, but never get rubbed smooth by the gilding of the grand dining room. Plus, his game is complete, from the springy focaccia with its oily, salted crust at the start, to the cocoa-pelted tiramisu presented tableside in an earthenware bowl the size of an SUV tyre at the end, from which they scoop your serving.

PERHAPS I SHOULDN'T SWOON OVER a plate of four perfect salted anchovies, those slender brown exclamation marks of intense, bolshie flavour presented here in a puddle of chilli-flecked oil. After all, it's only a victory of shopping; the heavy lifting was done by whoever cured the fillets. But the effect is cumulative. Drape them over swabs of that still-warm focaccia. Sigh over shards of crispbread, smeared with a mess of blitzed and seasoned tomato that tastes of a hot, languid summer's afternoon. Scoop up squares of tuna crudo interlaced with the tiniest dice of more tomato, then dusted with gratings of intense, salty bottarga. A lightly dressed salad of chopped artichoke hearts, root vegetables, orange and brazenly bitter curls of chicory is such a pretty tangle of fronds, I don't know whether to eat it or ask it out on a date. (Reader, I ate it.)

The waiters will of course give you florid, vaguely infantilising speeches about the structure of Italian meals, whether you want them or not. Nod along, then order the King's Porchetta, which is not some fancy hotel's refined version of rolled, spiced and roasted pork belly, but a charmingly plump cushion of fat-striated pig corseted by a blistered ribbon of golden crackling. It sits on a pillow of pumpkin purée. Or there's a sensitively cooked fillet of silvery bream on a mess of capers, olives and dessert-sweet datterino tomatoes that laughs in the face of the bleak winter weather outside. A side of Mazzei's zucchini fritti is non-negotiable. The portion is huge, as it should be for £15, but it's worth it for the raucous explosion of crisp, needle-thin joy that lands on the table, even though you know it's unfinishable.

As per the £15 side dish, the price of all this is clearly aimed at those who don't look at the prices, an impression not helped by the wine list. I blanch at even the lowest priced bottle and instead order 125ml measures of a nice white from Campania. Each costs £17.50, which turns out to be the price you can pay for an entire bottle online. Here a bottle is marked up by a factor of five to £89. To be fair, not all mark-ups are like this, but having to search online for the bargains before ordering is exhausting. In any case we are in the Corinthia, a fiercely polished hotel where basic rooms loiter at around £1,000 a night, and prices for the premium penthouse suites are only revealed by request. Having watched all of le Carré's *Night Manager* recently, I suddenly imagine Dickie Onslow Roper trooping in to sequester three tables for his napalm-trading entourage. Dickie would be very comfortable here.

The only way to deal with unconscionable pricing is to abandon having a conscience. Just give yourself to the sybaritic comfort of the superb food. Outside the dining room is another more relaxed space with a huge communal marble table, of a sort you could sacrifice Aslan on should the need arise. From there you can watch the open kitchen. Get a scoop of the cloudlike tiramisu, or the bombe of hazelnut ice cream with a liquid chocolate centre that arrives unwrapped from its greaseproof-paper package looking like an explosion in a cocoa powder factory. Then sit back and watch the cooks do their thing. I know I will sit in more comfortable spaces in 2026. I will certainly settle smaller bills. But I doubt I will eat better than I did at Mezzogiorno. FT

jay.rayner@ft.com

PHOTOGRAPHY *by* ANDY SEWELL • STYLING *by* GEORGIA RUDD

Recipe Club

Greek meatballs with a secret history

This nourishing soup is a Greek staple. Its magic comes from inside the meatball: when you mix uncooked rice into meat, brush it with flour and drop it into simmering broth, the rice will cook and swell the ball, and the starch will thicken the juice. An old-world alchemy.

Youvarlakia was likely born in the Ottoman Empire's Anatolian heartland, where techniques crossed Greek, Turkish, Armenian and Jewish kitchens. The name combines the Turkish word *yuvarlak*, round, with the Greek suffix of endearment, *aki*. So: "cute little rounds". As the Greeks in Turkey travelled to Greece during the forced population exchange, so too came this soup.

It is common to finish it with avgolemono, a tangy egg-lemon sauce. But this version, which comes from my grandmother Amalia, is much simpler. Amalia walked to Greece from Bayburt in Turkey with this recipe in her head, then taught my aunt Maria, who taught my cousin Kenia, who taught me. It has been adapted over generations, but it still tastes warming and ancient.
Lilah Raptopoulos, US editor, FTGlobetrotter

DRINK
A crisp, acidic white, like Assyrtiko.

SUBSTITUTIONS
The recipe is very forgiving. Mix beef with half chicken, pork, or lamb (or sub entirely). Sub dill for parsley.

TIP
If the broth is thin, sift some leftover flour into the soup, which will help it thicken.

GRANDMOTHER AMALIA'S YOUVARLAKIA

TO SERVE 4-6

- 500ml chicken broth (using bouillon, chicken base or stock)
- 1l water
- 450g ground beef
- 1 medium yellow onion, grated
- 1 bunch fresh parsley, leaves finely chopped
- 200g short or medium-grain rice (Arborio also works), uncooked
- 1 egg
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ tsp pepper
- 4 medium carrots, peeled and diced
- 2 large potatoes, peeled and diced to about 2cm pieces
- 60ml olive oil
- 100g plain flour, for coating
- Two lemons
- Greek yoghurt (optional)

1. Add the broth and water to a large pot. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to a gentle simmer.
2. In a large bowl, combine the meat, onions and most of the parsley (save some for garnish), uncooked rice and egg. Add the salt and pepper and combine well.
3. Add the carrots and potatoes to the simmering broth with the olive oil while you form the meatballs, so they have a short head start cooking.
4. Make small bite-sized meatballs, about the size of a ping-pong ball or walnut. Roll each meatball in flour, then carefully place inside the simmering broth. Cover.
5. Let the soup simmer gently, covered, for 30 minutes. (Check after about 20 minutes, taste, and add salt and pepper to the broth if necessary.)
6. Open a meatball to see if the rice is completely cooked, and check that the broth is thick. When ready, turn off heat, squeeze juice of half a lemon into broth, and carefully stir.
7. Serve each bowl with a squeeze of lemon, fresh parsley and fresh black pepper. Add a dollop of Greek yoghurt for a zing.

NEXT WEEK – HONEY & CO'S BEST ORANGE RECIPES

FT LIVE

In association with

DYENS & co.

BUSINESS OF LUXURY SUMMIT

Building resilience into luxury brands

17-19 May 2026 | In-Person & Digital
Borgo Egnazia, Puglia, Italy

Stéphane de La Faverie
President and CEO
The Estée Lauder Companies

Joanne Crevoiserat
CEO
Tapestry, Inc.

Ermenegildo Zegna
Group Executive Chairman
Ermenegildo Zegna Group

Susie McCabe
Co-CEO
McArthurGlen Group

Omer Acar
CEO
Raffles Hotels & Resorts and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts

Claire Bergkamp
CEO
Textile Exchange

Join us: luxuryglobal.live.ft.com

Gold sponsor

RAFFLES

Silver sponsors

McARTHURGLEN
DESIGNER OUTLETS

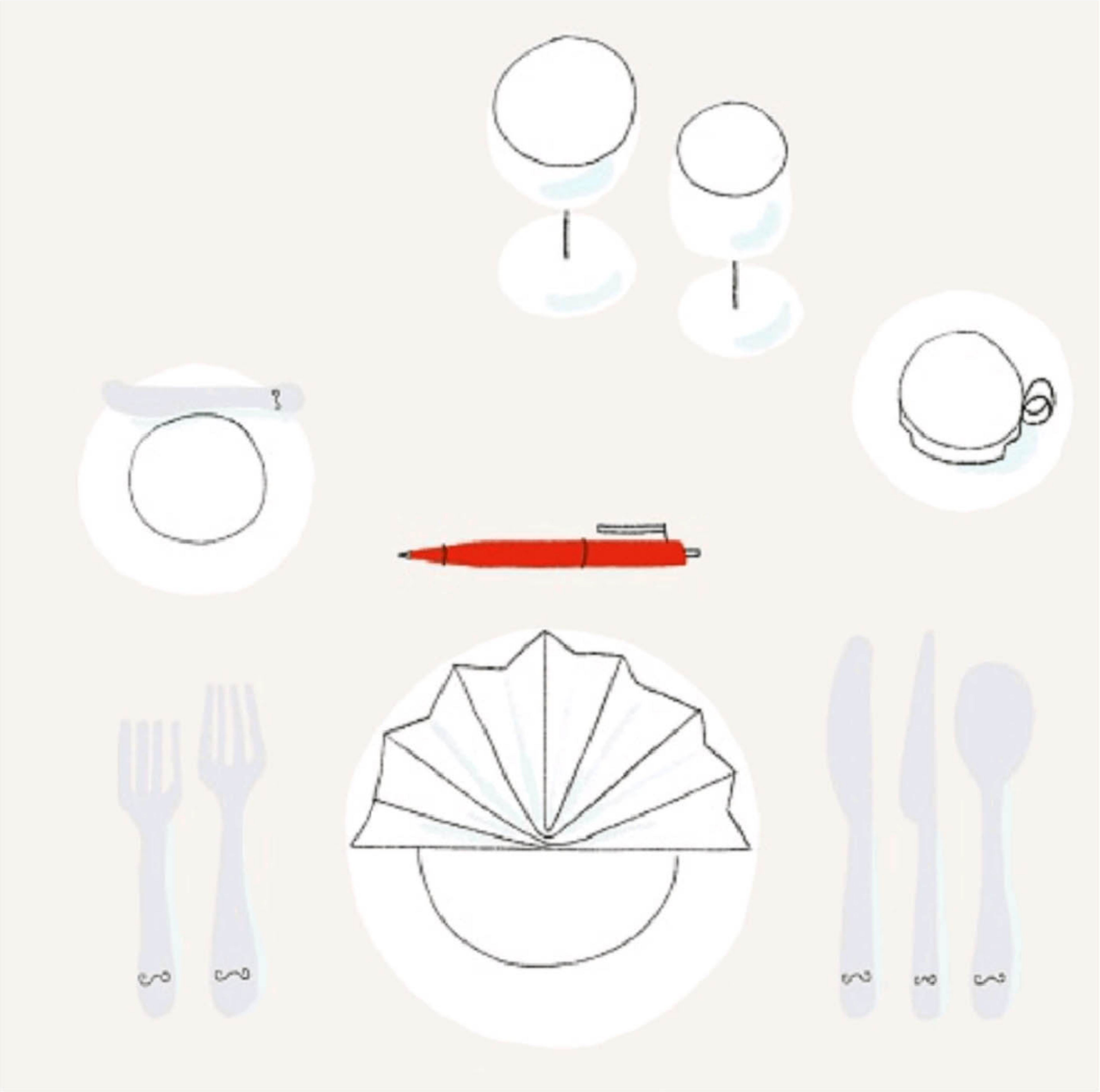
SYBARITE

Critic Unchained

We're nothing if not critical

by MARINA O'LOUGHLIN

ILLUSTRATION *by* JARED NANGLE



In my restaurant-obsessed world, there's been a lot of chat recently that could probably be filed under the pompous heading "whither criticism". It's been bubbling away for a while, but took off after an Observer piece in December suggesting we were in a "post-pan" scenario: TLDR (and it's a long, *long* piece) in a Covid-damaged, "be kind" Britain (lol), there's no appetite for the negative restaurant review. Well, out of step I might be, but I'm still hungry.

I write about restaurants for a living but, after years reviewing for the nationals, I'm no longer a critic. I don't have skin in this game. Now, like most of us, I'll tell pals what I love and move on from what I don't. While I don't regret having bailed on the role, I value its existence in a world of maw-stuffing, "banging, wow" influencers. Yes, they attract eyeballs newspaper critics can only dream of, but they're also frequently happy to trouser the industry payola.

The job of newspaper critics – film, TV, restaurant, whatever – is to sell newspapers, not proselytise for what they're employed to critique. Opinions are just that, so we find voices we trust and follow accordingly. If not, if personality and preferences, tendencies and turns of phrase don't matter, then bring on our AI overlords. There are some restaurant critics I find almost unreadable, but then I don't have to read them, do I? But nor do I feel the need to announce their obsolescence from a standpoint that celebrates the vanilla.

There's the very valid point that, while an industry is under threat from all directions, it's otiose and destructive to use the hammer of so-called mainstream media to clobber it further. But I'll let you into a restaurant criticism secret: most of us avoided hammering the indies, the mom and pop outfits, only sharpening claws when monsters hove into view: the VC-backed proto chains, copycats and cynical branding exercises. No critic with integrity goes looking for these, but if they present themselves with full fanfare, bring it on, baby. And if these aren't fair game, well, frankly, the gig no longer exists. There are those who'd argue that yep, this is what's happening, deal with it, daddy dinosaur. But trusted voices who aren't paid to praise are still valuable. Even restaurateurs I spoke to agreed. Where's the kudos if every review is a "kind" one?

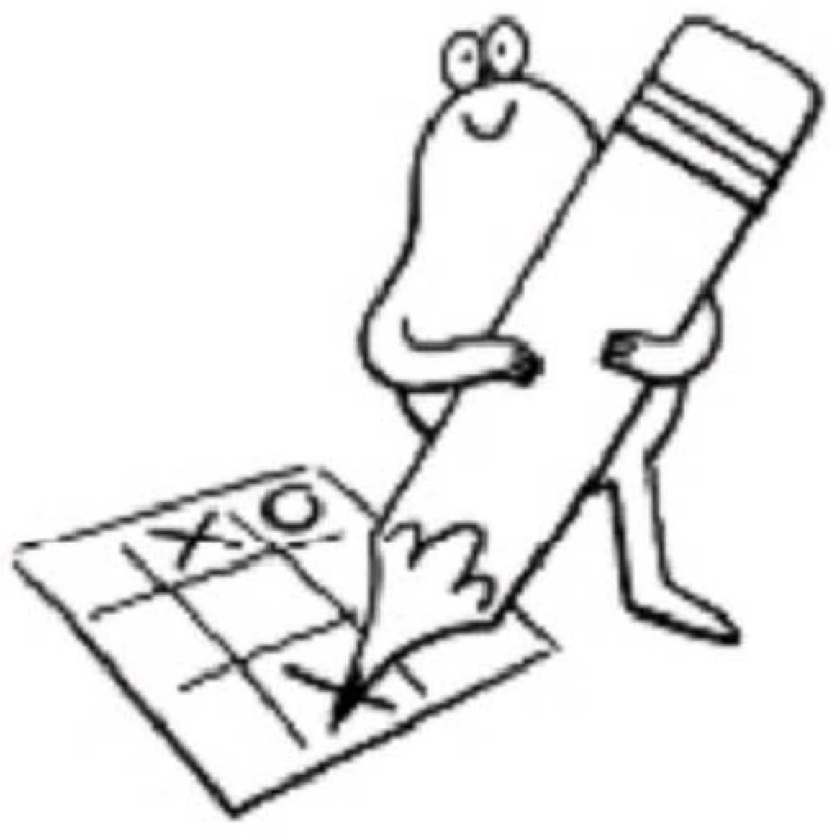
> Most of us only sharpened our claws when monsters hove into view

I don't buy the "be kind" brigade anyway. Before Christmas, I posted a gory vignette from Smithfield Market and got lambasted by raging vegans, half demanding empathy and half suggesting it should be my kids/mother/dog on that counter. Such kindness, I'm totally converted. I could say call me old-fashioned, but I don't believe that either. Slutty Cheff, an anonymous, 20-something author – her first book, *Tart*, about her time in restaurant kitchens, is a best-seller – is of the same mind. "It's depressing that writers are neutralising what they actually think," she told me. "I don't think it's because readers don't want critics, it's because writers are scared to offend." As we say online: this.

The clue's in the name: a critic without criticism is PR. The Sunday Times – home to AA Gill's famously incendiary takedowns (and nobody's clamouring for a return to that level of velociraptor action) – has, as of tomorrow, a new full-time restaurant critic in Camilla Long. She might not go the full Adrian, but will also not, as my ma used to say, miss them and hit the wall.

While there's a place for chefs' backstories and how they learnt to cook at the knee of their nonna, ya-ya, nani; how they came up with the name or decor for their restaurants; a dissertation on the changing face/gentrification of their neighbourhoods – you'll excuse me if I slightly glaze over. I want something that immerses me in a restaurant I might never visit – well-written, witty, contextual, knowledgeable and insightful, even if it's far from a rave. And that says something meaningful and fearless about the industry. When Jay Rayner of these pages tore apart the revered Le Cinq in Paris, it reverberated internationally. Meanwhile, his review of London's Beast memorably contained a line that had this reader praying for brain-bleach. (No, I'm not repeating it. Brrr.) Both places are still very much in business.

The critics aren't the all-powerful big enchiladas they were in Gill's day – replacing Pete Wells at The New York Times are two enthusiasts who seem, like Disney principals, surrounded by loveliness. But non-partisan critical opinion is still needed: I was delighted to read Helen Rosner in The New Yorker on cult chef Francis Mallmann's megabucks-backed La Boca: deliciously lacerating. (Plus he sounds like a culinary Swiss Toni.) If everyone just oozes blandishments, the crimes committed are worse than negativity. Ya boring.



GAMES

MINI CROSSWORD

NO 95 SET BY XELA

8 clues
2 straightforward
2 general knowledge
2 cryptic
2 anagrams

1		2		3		4
	■		■		■	
5						
	■		■		■	
6						
	■		■		■	
7						

ACROSS
1 Disease also known as lockjaw (7)
5 Enticed (7)
6 At grief (7)
7 Competition question (7)

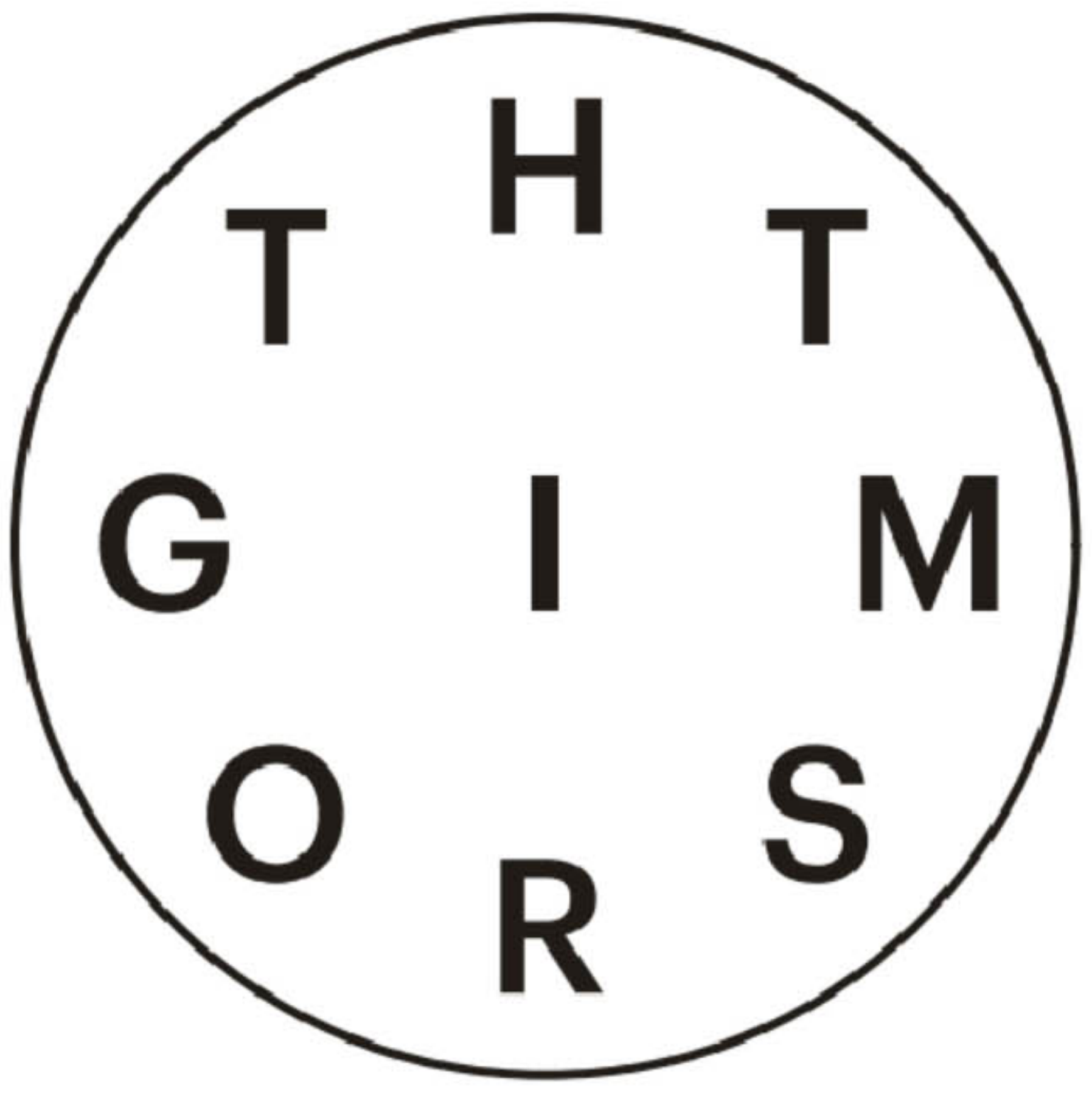
DOWN
1 Buy and sell vehicles on the road (7)
2 Capital of Estonia (7)
3 Recount (7)
4 Dad's set (7)

Access FT crosswords from the past 30 days – Cryptic, Polymath, Weekend and Sunday Puzzles – on ft.com/crosswordapp

WORD CIRCLE

NO 95

How many words can you form that use the centre letter plus two or more of the other letters? No letter may be used more times than it appears within the circle. There is one word that uses all nine letters.



SCORING
GOOD – 20
GREAT – 30
AMAZING – 40

BINARY PUZZLE

NO 95

Place 0 or 1 in every empty square so there is an equal number of each digit in every row and column. In any row or column, there must be no more than two of the same digit in succession.

	0						1
		1	0		1	0	1
		0		0			
0	0			0	1		1
1		0	0			1	0
			1		1		
1	1	0		0	1		
1						1	

©ANY PUZZLE MEDIA LTD

THIS WEEK'S QUIZ ANSWERS

A round on the links
The link was circles
1. Arctic tern
2. Lucy Stone (Lucy Stoners)
3. Future perfect
4. A blue dress 5. Upper Volta
6. *The Full Monty*
7. Sid Vicious 8. Inner ear
9. Social justice warrior
10. *Family Fortunes*

The picture round
Olivia Dean + Martin Freeman
= Dean Martin

SOLUTIONS

FOR ISSUE DATE
JANUARY 31

Mini Crossword No 94

N	O	T	A	B	L	E
I	■	A	■	U	■	N
M	Y	K	O	N	O	S
B	■	E	■	T	■	I
L	O	O	K	I	N	G
E	■	F	■	N	■	N
R	E	F	U	G	E	S

Binary Puzzle No 94

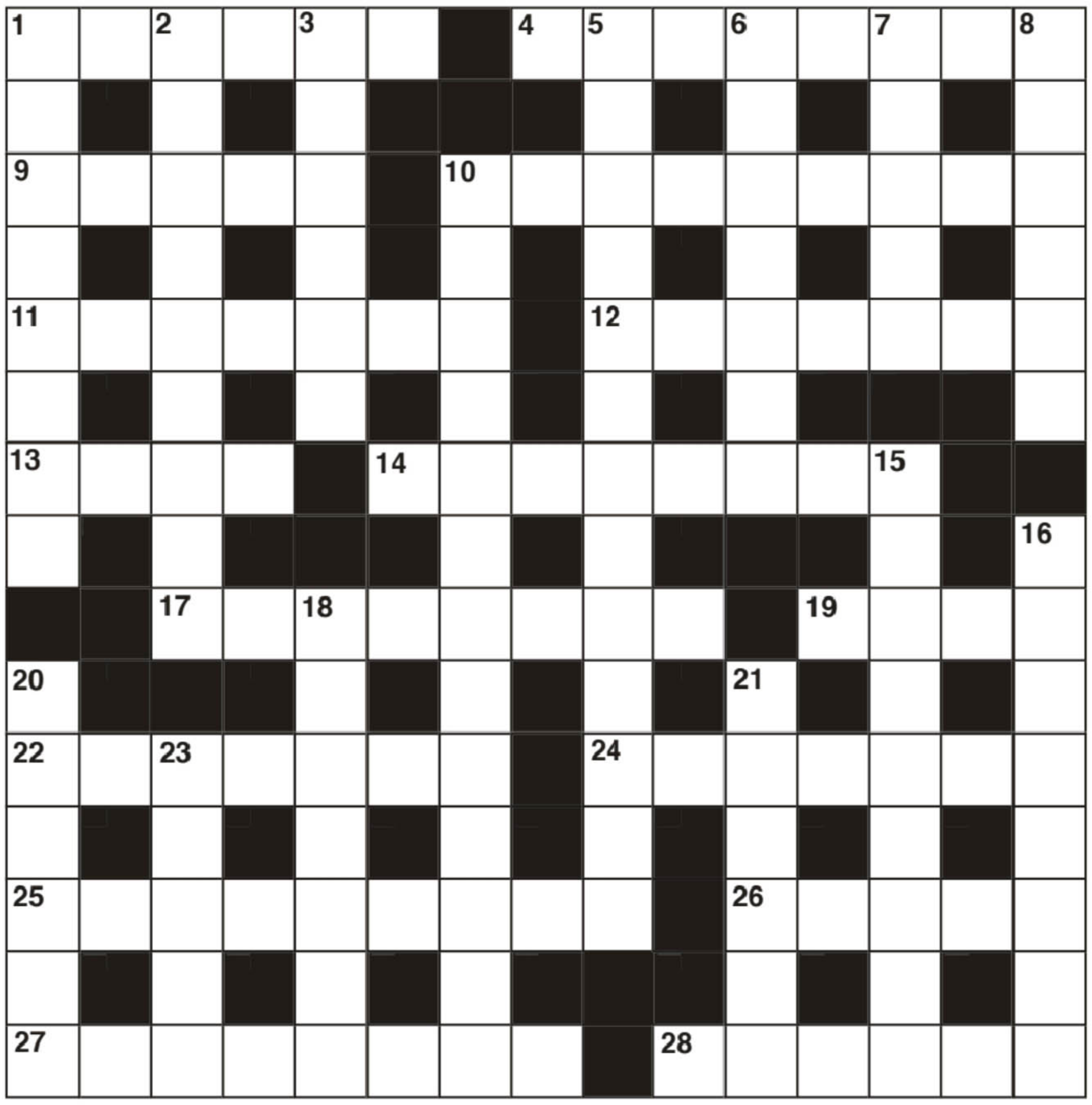
1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0
1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0

Word Circle No 94

citrus, critique, **critiques**, cruet, cruets, cruise, crust, cue, cues, cur, cure, cures, curie, curies, curs, curse, curt, cut, cute, cuter, cutes, cuts, ecru, quest, quiet, quiets, quire, quires, quit, quite, quits, risque, rue, rues, ruse, rust, rustic, rut, ruts, squire, squirt, sue, suet, suit, suite, sure, truce, truces, true, trues, uric, use, user

THE CROSSWORD

NO 779 SET BY ALDHELM



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

ACROSS

1 Immediately (2, 4)
4 Benevolent, liberal (8)
9 Cowboy show (5)
10 Grabbing, grasping (9)
11 To do with the real world (7)
12 Cost (7)
13 Religious painting (4)
14 Lazy, idle (8)
17 Praiseworthy (8)
19 Rage, wrath (4)
22 Stage, platform (7)
24 Protection for one sewing (7)
25 Appearance, coming (9)
26 Camouflage colour (5)
27 Elastic (8)
28 Small falcon (6)

DOWN

1 One driver's warning put up with fuel for flying mechanism (8)
2 Traditional locos hold out (3, 6)
3 Plant's American – mostly pot, at first (6)
5 Scent for elite due to eat out, perhaps (3, 2, 8)
6 European diocese shelters head fugitive (7)
7 One working under golden stars (5)
8 Seal, eg, isn't wild (6)
10 March, maybe – one getting forward with weapon in continued harassing, initially (8, 5)
15 Little picture in most of the album that's re-edited (9)
16 Deliberately mixed dyes in large number (2, 6)
18 Thus endlessly stuck up, embracing puritan that's high-minded (7)
20 Garment's fibres get mixed up (6)
21 The French follow choicest condiment (6)
23 Guide young farm animal (5)

Crossword No 778

■	A	S	S	I	D	U	O	U	S	N	E	S	S	■
■	■	T	■	N	■	N	■	G	■	E	■	H	■	■
T	R	U	S	T	■	D	A	L	M	A	T	I	A	N
H	■	M	■	E	■	E	■	Y	■	R	■	T	■	O
E	M	P	E	R	O	R	■	■	A	T	T	A	I	N
M	■	U	■	■	■	S	■	W	■	H	■	K	■	E
A	P	P	O	I	N	T	E	E	■	I	N	E	R	T
L	■	■	■	N	■	U	■	L	■	N	■	■	■	H
D	I	C	E	D	■	D	I	L	I	G	E	N	C	E
I	■	O	■	O	■	Y	■	S	■	■	■	O	■	L
V	E	R	O	N	A	■	■	P	A	R	A	B	L	E
E	■	S	■	E	■	M	■	O	■	E	■	L	■	S
S	L	A	P	S	T	I	C	K	■	P	R	E	S	S
■	■	I	■	I	■	N	■	E	■	E	■	S	■	■
■	I	R	R	A	T	I	O	N	A	L	I	T	Y	■

GETTY IMAGES

A ROUND ON THE LINKS

BY JAMES WALTON

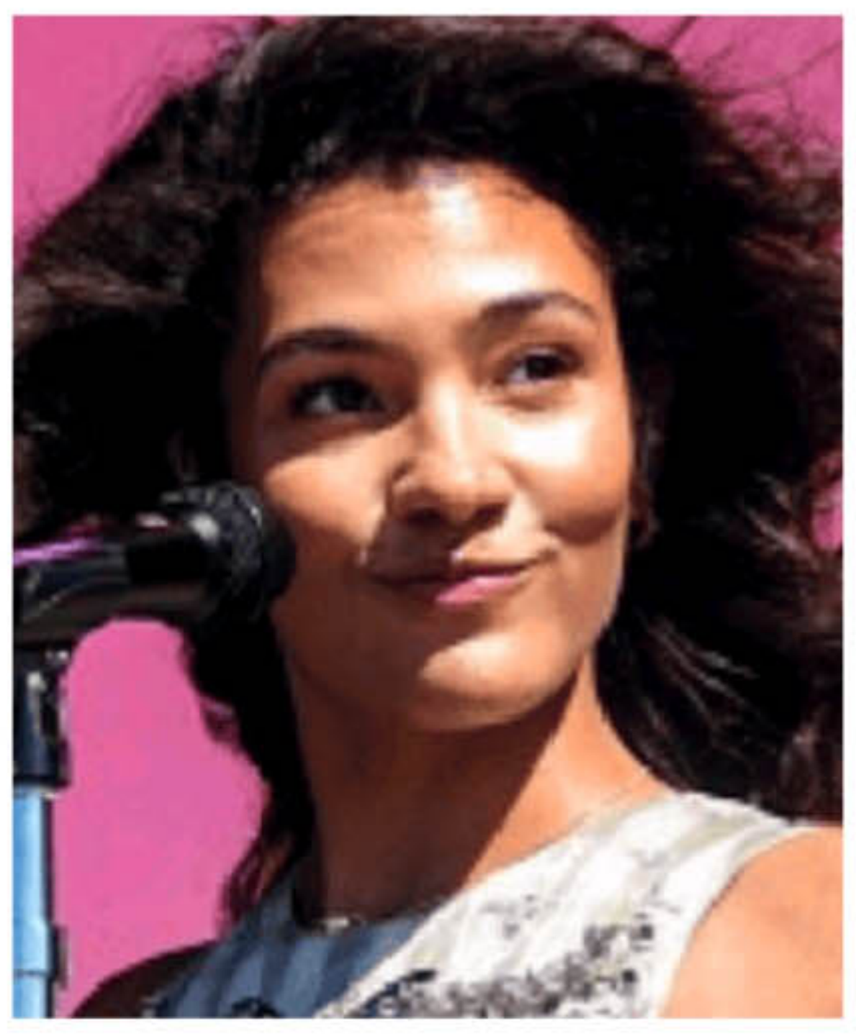
All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the connection, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1 Which species of bird has the longest annual migration?
2 Which 19th-century American feminist kept her maiden name on getting married, inspiring the collective nickname for women who do the same?
3 "I will have answered this question by the end of the quiz" is a sentence using what verb tense?
4 What was the Devil in, according to the title of a hard-boiled crime novel of 1990 by Walter Mosley?
5 What country renamed itself Burkina Faso in 1984?
6 Which hit movie of 1997 begins with an extract from a 1971 film promoting Sheffield as a "city on the move"?
7 In 1977, who replaced Glen Matlock (*pictured*) in a prominent British band?
8 In which specific – and therefore two-word – part of the human body is the cochlea?
9 In the culture wars, SJW stands for which generally pejorative term?
10 Which TV game show has been presented by Bob Monkhouse, Max Bygraves, Les Dennis and Gino D'Acampo?

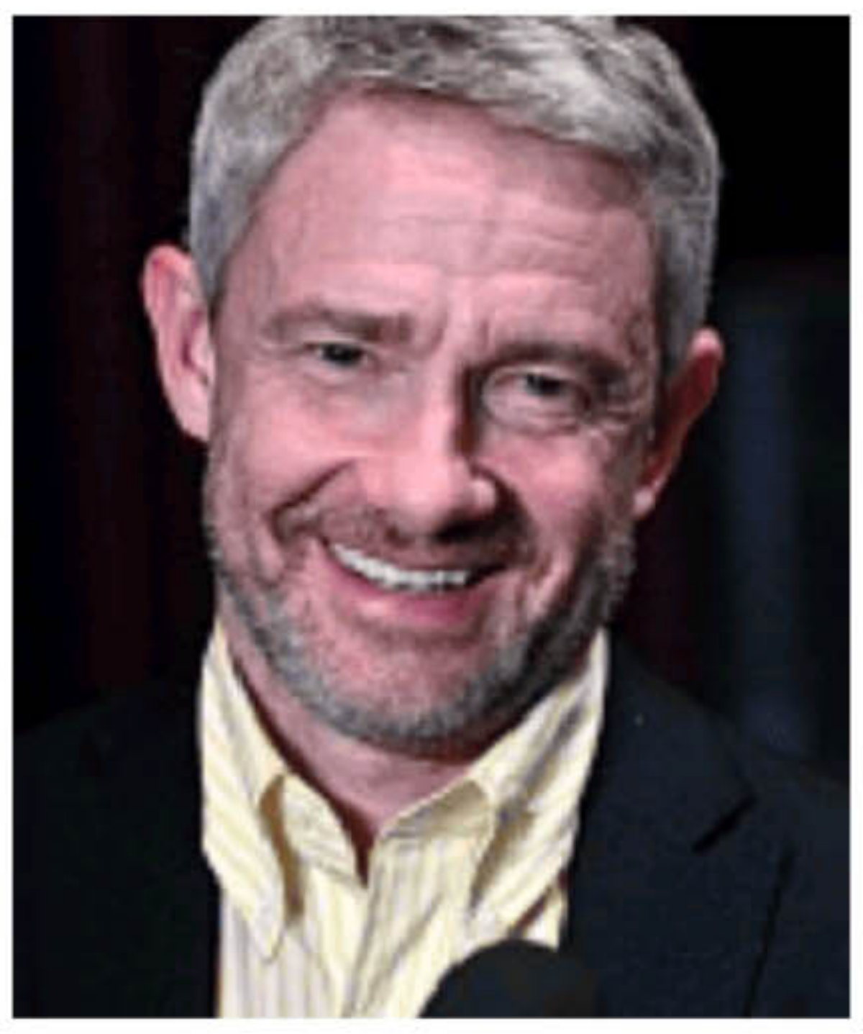
THE PICTURE ROUND

BY JAMES WALTON

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



+



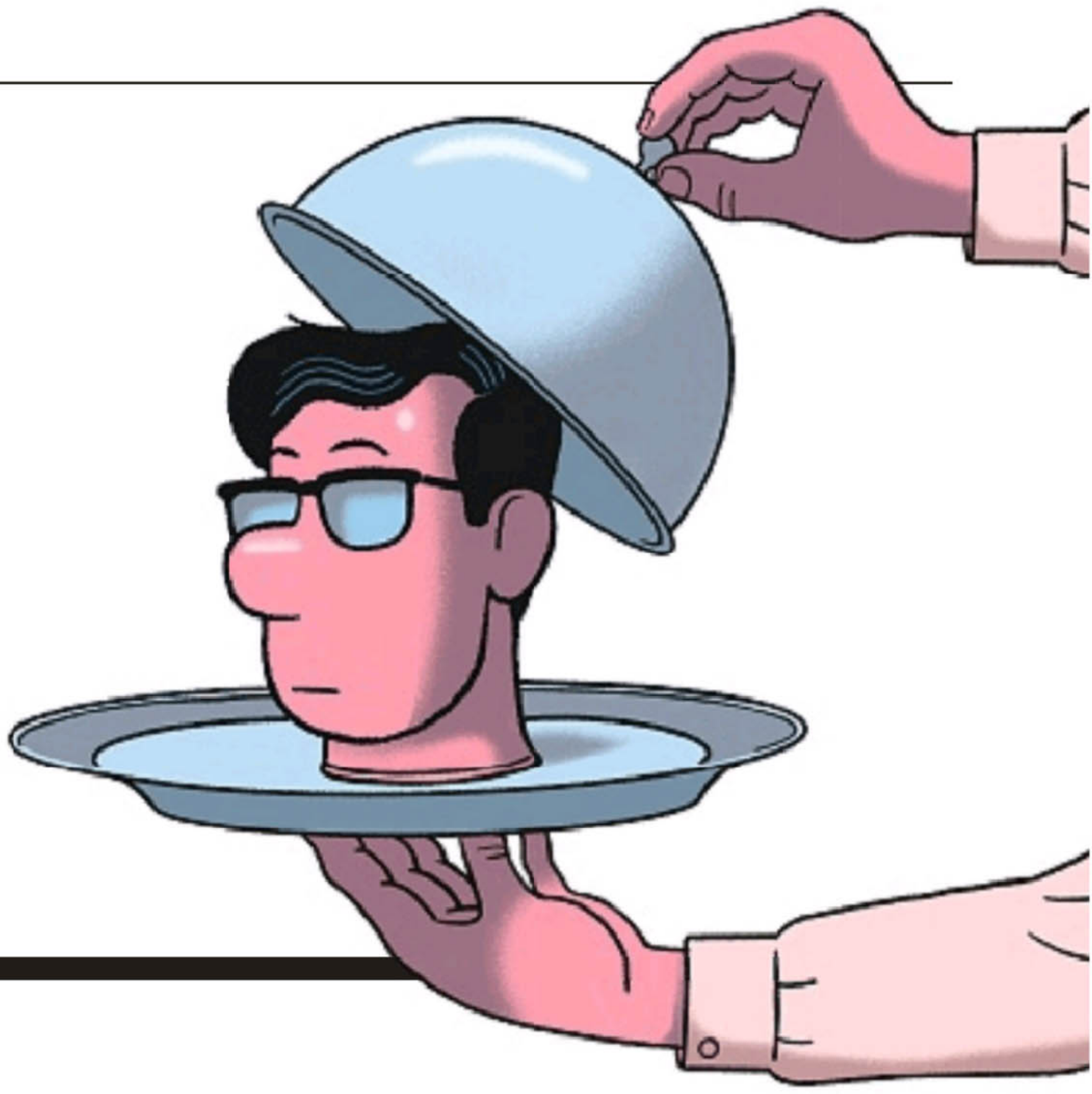
= ?

Answers opposite

What Fresh Hell

Do I need to cut back on Deliveroo?

Work, life and family dilemmas solved by *Robert Shrimsley*



The Deliveroo rider knows my name. This is not good. And I don't mean he's read it on the dispatch and is just being polite. I mean he plainly recognises me.

There are other riders who sometimes arrive with an order, but this one particular guy is especially frequent. He has definitely started to greet me like a long-lost friend. Well, apart from the long-lost bit – it's probably only been a couple of days – and the friend part too, now I think of it.

It may be that I'm scrupulous about giving a tip, especially on these horrid winter nights. But who am I kidding? It's mainly down to the fact that he is one of my most regular visitors. There are relatives who come round less often (and none brings entrées from Côte).

On further reflection, the real giveaway is the fact that the service has become a noun in our house. A bloody noun: don't worry we'll get a Deliveroo. Uber as a noun, I understand. But Deliveroo as a noun without any of the informative descriptors you put in front of takeaway, for example, Chinese, is a clear warning sign. What kind of meal are you having tonight? Something someone brings… it's a Deliveroo. No, I can't tell you exactly what the food is, but we've nailed the logistics.

To be clear, I love the service, and it is not as if I wasn't going to eat anyway. For too many of us, Deliveroo, Uber Eats or DoorDash in the US is becoming too much of a habit. I am fortunate enough to have the means to fund my Deliveroo habit but there are others out there who will soon need a second job just to afford that poke bowl.

There will always be the odd occasion when there is a good reason for getting your food delivered. And with the price of eating out rocketing, the temptation to save by getting a nice meal delivered is understandable, even if you could also pay for something tasty from M&S and save even more.

Aside from the innate sloth implicit in regular usage, all those meals slathered in oil and cream sauces and delivered to your door are essentially a reverse Ozempic. They help you put on more weight with absolutely no effort.

Most of us got in the habit during the pandemic, when delivery meals offered a small treat or touch of normality, as well as a way of supporting local businesses. But as the lockdown lifted, some of us remained in delivery prison. Pain points include Friday night. The fridge is empty and you won't be replenishing your groceries till tomorrow. Why not degrade yourself with a cheeky Nando's? Or maybe you are working from home and would only have spent the money buying lunch. Still you better add a cake otherwise you are paying a lot for a Pret sandwich.

> All those meals slathered in oil and cream sauces and delivered to your door are essentially a reverse Ozempic

And they know how to keep you hooked; the subscription that gives you free delivery and the promise of priority services that ensure other people's food goes cold before yours.

But aside from the health and weight-gain issues – and the expense – there is the ethical question. It's less the fact that you can't be bothered to drive to the takeaway than the fact that you can't be bothered to walk into your kitchen.

Deliveroo is the food equivalent of doomscrolling, a function of boredom and laziness. You could get up off your backside and cook something, but that would require effort, choices, possibly even planning. How much easier to scroll through the options and wait for the doorbell?

And the high wears off so fast. For power-users, it's not even a treat any more. Go to a restaurant and you are set for an hour or two. Get a Deliveroo (see, a noun) and you can all be back to your separate rooms within 30 minutes. If you live with others, cooking is sociable. The kitchen is a gathering point. And even if you are on your own, cooking is active rather than passive.

So to return to the question. If you are asking, you already know the answer. Convenience was the drug of the past few years, maybe a little more effort can be the next big addiction.

Enjoy the odd treat, but, yes, maybe try a little harder in the kitchen. Or pick up something to cook on the way home. Not a ready meal, although at least that's cheaper, but something that will take at least 10 or 15 minutes to prepare. It's healthier too. Your bank account will feel heavier, but in every way, you might just feel lighter.

Now you'll have to excuse me, that's the doorbell. FT

ILLUSTRATION *by* LUCAS VARELA

EMAIL ROBERT *at* MAGAZINELETTERS@FT.COM

RANDOX
HEALTH

HEALTH CHECKS
that put you in control

Spot imbalances early with personalised insights that support longevity and guide smarter choices.

Find Out More

Use code **RXH20** for **20%** off all in-clinic tests
Offer valid until 21st Feb 2026

Trustpilot
★★★★★

G.COLLINS & SONS